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WARRIORS

Leafpool's wish



**SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!**

ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

LEAFPOOL'S
WISH

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER

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Dedication

Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

ALLEGIANCES

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

FIRESTAR—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom

LEAFPOOL—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

(toms, and she-cats without kits)

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom

BRACKENFUR—golden brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, WHITEPAW

THORNCLAW—golden brown tabby tom

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

ASHFUR—pale gray (with darker flecks) tom, dark blue eyes

APPRENTICE, BIRCHPAW

RAINWHISKER—dark gray tom with blue eyes

SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

SPIDERLEG—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing

ELDERS

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

QUEENS

ELDERS

WINDCLAN

LEADER

kits)

FERNCLOUD—pale gray (with darker flecks) she-cat, green eyes, mother of Dustpelt's kits

SORRELTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

DAISY—cream-colored, long-furred cat from the horseplace (former warriors and queens, now retired)

GOLDENFLOWER—pale ginger coat, the oldest nursery queen

LONGTAIL—pale tabby tom with dark black stripes, retired early due to failing sight

MOUSEFUR—small dusky brown she-cat

BLACKSTAR—large white tom with huge jet-black paws

RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat

LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom

(toms, and she-cats without kits)

OAKFUR—small brown tom

APPRENTICE, SMOKEPAW

CEDARHEART—dark gray tom

ROWANCLAW—ginger tom

TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

BOULDER—skinny gray tom

ONESTAR—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY
MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

QUEENS

ELDERS

RIVERCLAN
LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

QUEENS

ASHFOOT—gray she-cat
BARKFACE—short-tailed brown tom
(toms, and she-cats without kits)
TORNEAR—tabby tom
WEBFOOT—dark gray tabby tom
CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom
OWLWHISKER—light brown tabby tom
NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat
WEASELFUR—ginger tom with white paws
(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)
WHITETAIL—small white she-cat
(former warriors and queens, now retired)
MORNINGFLOWER—tortoiseshell queen
RUSHTAIL—light brown tom

LEOPARDSTAR—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat
MISTYFOOT—gray she-cat with blue eyes
MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat
APPRENTICE, WILLOWPAW
(toms, and she-cats without kits)
BLACKCLAW—smoky black tom
APPRENTICE, BEECHPAW
VOLETOOTH—small brown tabby tom
SWALLOWTAIL—dark tabby she-cat
STONESTREAM—gray tom
REEDWHISKER—black tom
APPRENTICE, RIPPLEPAW
(she-cats expecting or nursing

kits)

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat
with blue eyes

DAWNFLOWER—pale gray she-cat

THE TRIBE OF RUSHING WATER

BROOK WHERE SMALL FISH SWIM

(BROOK)—brown tabby she-cat

STORMFUR—dark gray tom with
amber eyes

OTHER ANIMALS

SMOKY—muscular gray-and-white
tom who lives in a barn at the
horseplace

FLOSS—small gray-and-white she-
cat who lives at the horseplace

PIP—black-and-white terrier who
lives with Twolegs near the
horseplace

MIDNIGHT—a stargazing badger
who lives by the sea

Maps







CHAPTER 1



“Keep still, Birchpaw! If you don’t stop wriggling, I’ll have Dustpelt sit on you!” Leafpool retrieved the fallen moss with a hiss and held it over the apprentice’s eye once more.

“It stings!” Birchpaw protested.

“What, worse than a badger’s claws?” Leafpool meowed skeptically. She squeezed the moss between her pads and a bead of green juice dropped into the center of Birchpaw’s half-closed eye. Birchpaw winced but Leafpool quickly placed her paw on top of his eyelid, keeping it closed while the juice treated the infection.

Inevitably, memories of the badger attack flooded back to her: the sight of her Clanmates battling for their lives when she and Crowfeather had stood, horrorstruck, at the entrance to the hollow; the sound of small furred bodies thudding into the ground, tossed by gigantic black-and-white paws; the snarls of the badgers rumbling beneath the shrieks of warriors. Birchpaw had been lucky to escape with nothing more serious than a clawed eye. Sootfur had been killed, and so had Cinderpelt the medicine cat, desperately protecting Sorreltail as she gave birth to her kits. Leafpool felt a fresh wave of grief, sharp as ever, when she thought of her mentor dying without her. Cinderpelt must have been terrified for the future of ThunderClan without a medicine cat, yet she still refused to leave Sorreltail’s side.

I came back, Cinderpelt, and I stayed, Leafpool whispered fiercely, hoping that her mentor could hear her in StarClan.

“Talking to yourself, eh?” Brackenfur mewed, appearing in

the entrance to the den.

Leafpool shook the memories clear from her mind. "Just remembering something important," she replied. "Is everything okay, Brackenfur?"

"Er, can I go now?" Birchpaw chirped, looking up at her with his injured eye closed and weeping with juice.

Leafpool nodded. "Of course, but you're still not allowed out of the hollow! I don't want any brambles poking you in that eye before it's fully healed."

Birchpaw trotted out, muttering under his breath. Brackenfur flicked the apprentice with his tail-tip as he passed. "Some cats need to remember how lucky they were to survive that battle," he grunted.

Leafpool bowed her head. "And those who fell will not be forgotten."

Brackenfur ducked to enter the den. Like most of Leafpool's Clanmates, he glanced nervously up at the roof as if he was wondering how the weight of the cliffs above them was supported. "Sorreltail sent me," he meowed. "Cinderkit's picked up a couple of fleas and she wondered if you had anything that might soothe the bites."

Leafpool pictured the tiny gray she-cat scratching at her fluffy pelt. "I'm sure I can help," she purred. "Tell Sorreltail I'll bring something over before sunhigh."

Brackenfur narrowed his eyes. "There's no rush. You look tired, Leafpool. Is there anything I can do?"

Leafpool shook her head. "I'm fine. It's always busy after a battle, and a nursery full of kits doesn't help!" She paused. "Not that I don't rejoice at every kit born to ThunderClan," she added.

Brackenfur's gaze softened. "They are all precious," he agreed. He padded out of the den and Leafpool followed him as far as the entrance, where she stood in a shaft of watery sunlight. On the opposite side of the clearing, her sister Squirrelflight was sharing a mouse with Brambleclaw, her dark ginger body curled into his. Leafpool felt a twist of concern in her belly. It looked like Squirrelflight had finally made her choice between their Clanmate Ashfur and the broad-shouldered dark tabby. Leafpool wouldn't miss the tension between the warriors while Squirrelflight had been making up her mind, but

she wished with all her heart that her sister had chosen differently. How could Leafpool tell her that she had dreamed of the Dark Forest and seen Tigerstar mentoring Brambleclaw in secret, training his son in the most terrible ways to kill and maim an enemy? However often Leafpool told herself that Brambleclaw was a loyal ThunderClan warrior, no cat could deny that his father was one of the most dangerous cats ever to live in the Clans.

And yet there had been the vision of stars over the lake, when Leafpool had been walking alone at sunset. Two starry shapes, unmistakably Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw, padding side by side across the sky, tails entwined. What could that mean except that these two warriors were destined to be together? Reluctantly, Leafpool had told her sister what she had seen; it was not the duty of a medicine cat to choose which omens and visions to keep secret. Leafpool knew that this had helped Squirrelflight decide between Brambleclaw and Ashfur. And when Leafpool treated Brambleclaw for injuries that could only have come from fighting in his dreams with his Dark Forest father, she said nothing to her sister. She just hoped that Brambleclaw would make his own decision to leave his connection with Tigerstar behind, and learn only from what his living Clanmates could teach him.

Cinderkit's flea bites were easily treated with some soothing marigold leaves rubbed into her cobweb-soft fur. The tiny cat squirmed so much that Leafpool suspected her littermates would receive a good dose as well. Sorreltail blinked gratefully at her, happily worn out by nursing and keeping her little family in order. Leafpool breathed in the sweet, milky scent of the nursery and let it comfort her for a moment. She held on to the memory of it as she settled into her nest that night. The den still seemed too empty without Cinderpelt sleeping beside her, the shadows cold and thick against the rough stone walls. Leafpool tucked her nose under her tail and took a deep breath. Tonight she wanted to walk in the Dark Forest again. She needed to know if Brambleclaw was still being mentored by his father.

She woke in a dense green forest, dimly lit by an unseen moon and stirred by a whispering breeze. She felt the familiar shudder of horror at the thought of dead cats unwanted by

StarClan hiding in the bushes, watching her with angry yellow eyes. But she forced herself to walk along the path that curved between the mossy trunks, convinced she could hear her heartbeat echoing among the trees.

Suddenly Leafpool stopped. Three cats stood a little way ahead with their backs to her. She recognized two of them at once—but these weren't Dark Forest warriors. Their fur glittered with starlight, and silver beams pooled around their paws as if they were standing in water. One of them turned to face Leafpool, and she felt her heart lift with joy. *Bluestar!*

"Come out, Leafpool," the StarClan cat meowed. "We've been waiting for you."

Leafpool walked forward until she could smell the scent of wind and stars on the old leader's pelt.

"You took your time," grunted Yellowfang.

Leafpool didn't know the third cat, a broad-shouldered golden tabby. He dipped his head to her. "Greetings, Leafpool. My name is Lionheart. I was with Bluestar when your father Firestar first came to the forest."

"I'm honored to meet you," Leafpool meowed. "But where am I? Why have you brought me here?" She hadn't dreamed of this place before, yet it couldn't be the Dark Forest, not if StarClan cats were here.

"Come," Bluestar ordered, turning to follow the path deeper into the forest.

It led to a moonlit clearing, and the trees that had seemed so sinister before now looked graceful and welcoming, filled with the scents of prey. In the clear sky, three tiny stars gleamed more brightly than the others, throbbing with silver light.

"Bluestar, what's that?" Leafpool whispered.

Bluestar didn't reply. Instead, she walked into the center of the clearing and gestured with her tail for Leafpool to sit. Leafpool looked up once more, but the three stars had vanished.

"Do you have a sign for me?" she asked.

"Not exactly," Bluestar answered. "But we wanted to tell you that the path of your life will twist in ways yet hidden to you."

"Yes." Yellowfang sounded tense, as if there was more she wanted to say but some unspoken promise prevented her. "You will tread a path that few medicine cats have before."

Leafpool felt a stab of alarm. "What do you mean?"

"There are cats you have yet to meet," Bluestar meowed. "But their paws will shape your future."

What does that mean?

Lionheart rested his tail on her shoulder and his scent drifted around her, brave and reassuring. "We have come to give you strength," he murmured.

"Whatever happens, remember that we are always with you," Bluestar mewed.

Her blue eyes glittered with concern and kindness, but Leafpool still had no idea what any of this meant. Her life was set in stone now, like her den beneath the cliffs. She would be ThunderClan's medicine cat until it was her turn to walk with these cats in StarClan. What she had with Crowfeather . . . all that was over, forgotten, a part of her life that would fade in time to nothing.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Can't you tell me more?"

Bluestar shook her head. "Even StarClan can't see everything that will happen. The path ahead of you vanishes into shadow—but we will walk with you every paw step of the way, I promise."

Leafpool let herself be comforted by Bluestar's words. If StarClan walked alongside her, nothing terrible could happen. When she had left her Clan to be with Crowfeather, she had felt as if her ancestors had abandoned her forever. But she had followed her heart back to ThunderClan, and now they were beside her again, protecting her, guiding her, keeping her safe.

I made the right decision—no, the only decision—when I came back to the hollow. Nothing will threaten my place in ThunderClan again.



CHAPTER 2



The moss beneath Leafpool's paws crunched with frost as she slipped into Firestar's den. One moon had passed since her dream of the three little stars, and leaf-fall was giving way to the coldest season. Leafpool fluffed up her fur and reminded herself to tell Whitepaw to bring fresh moss up to the Highledge. Firestar had to be kept warm and dry while he recovered from losing a life.

Leafpool shuddered as she recalled the blood-drenched events of the previous day, when she had found her father with a Twoleg trap around his neck, and Brambleclaw standing over the body of Hawkfrost, dead in the lake. It had been many moons since StarClan had sent her the strange, unknowable warning: *Before there is peace, blood will spill blood and the lake will run red.* That day had come when Hawkfrost tried to kill the leader of ThunderClan by luring him into a trap set for foxes. Brambleclaw had saved Firestar's life by digging up the wooden stake that held the trap, and then fighting Hawkfrost to the death—his own half brother, another son of Tigerstar. Brambleclaw was the blood that spilled blood. Leafpool's vision of a circle of thorns protecting ThunderClan, and Firestar's decision to make Brambleclaw deputy in place of Graystripe, seemed to carry the weight of StarClan now.

"Is that you, Leafpool?" Firestar croaked from the shadows.

"Hush, don't talk," Leafpool ordered. She bent over her father's nest and sniffed. There was no sign of infection, thank StarClan, and the wound left by the trap around Firestar's neck

was shallow and would quickly heal. His throat would be sore for some time, but Leafpool had brought her last stock of honey to soothe it, along with a poppy seed to help him rest.

"Eat this," she meowed, unfolding the leaf wrap she had brought to reveal the sticky pool of honey topped with a tiny black seed.

"I'm fine," Firestar protested. He propped himself up, his ginger pelt gray in the half-light. "Don't fuss."

"I'll fuss as much as I have to," Leafpool retorted. "You lost a life yesterday, don't forget."

Her father's green eyes gleamed. "I won't forget, don't worry. But I have a Clan to lead. Our Clanmates need to see that I am okay, and there are patrols to organize."

"Brambleclaw has already sent out the hunting patrols," Leafpool told him. "I have told everyone that you're fine, just resting. Now, lie down, or I'll send Mousefur to tell you stories until you fall asleep."

Firestar gave a faint purr as he curled up among the feathers that lined his nest. "The poppy seed can do that for me, thanks. All right, Leafpool, I'll do what you say." He blinked fondly at her. "I need to remember that you're not just my daughter, you're my medicine cat, too."

Yes, thought Leafpool as she picked her way down the rocky slope after watching Firestar lap up the honey and poppy seed. *I am ThunderClan's medicine cat. Nothing else matters but my duty to my Clanmates.* She started running through a list of late-season herbs she wanted to find before the frost nipped the delicate leaves, and wondered if there was any honey left in the old bees' nest near the top of the ridge. A flash of white fur coming out of the apprentices' den caught her eye.

"Whitepaw!" Leafpool called, stepping down to the solid earthen floor of the clearing. "Please could you fetch some more moss for Firestar's nest? Make sure it's completely dry."

"Sure!" The apprentice nodded. "I can do that before training." She whisked around and pushed her way through the thorns that protected the entrance to the hollow.

"Are you stealing my apprentice?" came a warm voice behind Leafpool.

She turned to see Brackenfur watching her. "Only for a moment," she promised. "Firestar's bedding is a little frosty this

morning.”

The golden tabby narrowed his eyes. “How is he?”

“Fine,” mewed Leafpool. “But losing a life is a bigger deal than Firestar makes out, so I’ve told him to stay in his nest today.”

Brackenfur nodded. “Quite right. Brambleclaw can manage the patrols.”

Leafpool studied the warrior. “Do you think Firestar made the right decision to declare Graystripe dead and appoint Brambleclaw in his place?”

The warrior flicked his tail. “A Clan without a deputy is . . . an odd thing. I always felt that it made us vulnerable.” He bent down and touched his muzzle to the top of Leafpool’s head. “But there are some absences that leave us even more unprotected. I’m glad you came back, Leafpool. Without a medicine cat, I don’t think ThunderClan would survive.”

Leafpool was saved from having to reply by a flurry of paw steps from the nursery.

“Brackenfur!” squeaked Berrykit. “Watch this fighting move that Thornclaw taught me!” He skidded to halt in front of the warrior. “I don’t need to wait another moon before I become an apprentice,” he chirped. “I can defend my Clan *now*!” He squatted on his haunches and glared at an ant scuttling across the ground, then sprang into the air with his front legs outstretched. He landed in a heap of creamy fur while the ant darted unscathed beneath a stone.

“You’re almost ready, little one,” Brackenfur meowed, picking up Berrykit by the scruff of his neck and setting him on his paws again. “Keep practicing!”

Daisy appeared at the entrance to the nursery, her cream fur ruffled. “Berrykit! Stop bothering Brackenfur! Come here so I can finish washing you!”

Berrykit’s littermates Hazelkit and Mousekit popped their heads out beside their mother. “Yes, Berrykit,” mewed Hazelkit. “You’re so naughty, Firestar is going to feed you to the badgers!”

Daisy looked horrified. “Firestar would never do such a thing! Go back inside, you two, it’s far too cold out here.” She ushered her kits back into the nursery.

“Daisy seems a bit overwhelmed,” Leafpool commented with

an amused purr.

Brackenfur sent Berrykit on his way with a gentle nudge. "The nursery's pretty crowded with Sorreltail's kits as well. I don't remember having this many kits at the start of leaf-bare before."

Leafpool nodded. "At least Daisy's kits will be able to help with hunting soon."

Brackenfur tipped his head on one side. "Help—or hinder," he purred. Then he straightened up. "But if StarClan has given us the gift of so many kits, our ancestors must know that we are able to take care of them. That is our duty, after all." He strode away, calling to Ashfur that they would take their apprentices out as soon as Whitepaw returned.

There was a rustle of branches at the entrance to the nursery and four tiny bundles hopped out. "Can't catch me!" squealed Molekit, charging across the clearing on his stumpy legs.

"Bet I can!" puffed his sister Honeykit as she raced after him.

Poppykit and Cinderkit followed more slowly, placing each paw delicately on the frosty grass. "Ooh, it's cold!" mewed Poppykit, fluffing up her tortoiseshell fur.

Cinderkit looked around, and Leafpool felt the little cat's pale blue gaze rest on her. "Look, it's Leafpool!" Cinderkit chirped. She trotted over to the medicine cat, her short gray tail straight up in the air. "How's Firestar?" she mewed. "We heard there was a terrible accident."

"Yes, an accident," Leafpool echoed. Wise Sorreltail was keeping the true horror of the events from her babies. "He's doing well," she purred. "He'll stay in his nest for one day, then he'll be up and about again."

"Good," mewed Cinderkit. "A Clan needs its leader."

Leafpool stared at the tiny cat. What was it about her that seemed so different from other kits? Sometimes she sounded so much older than a moon, and Leafpool had watched her gaze at her Clanmates as if she was looking from far, far away, with the knowledge of a cat in StarClan. Also, there was something familiar about her scent, more than the milky comfort of the nursery and Sorreltail's warm smell. Leafpool was about to bend down and sniff Cinderkit's pelt again when Sorreltail squeezed out of the nursery, her belly still loose and swollen from the birth.

"Kits!" she called. "Don't bother the warriors!"

"We're not!" squeaked Honeykit. "Me and Molekit are practicing our running."

"Yeah, and I'm still faster than you," her brother insisted. He stretched out one front paw. "Look, my legs are longer!"

"But mine are quicker!" yowled Honeykit, hurtling away in a blur of light brown fur.

Sorreltail winced as her daughter almost knocked Whitepaw off her feet. The apprentice was half hidden behind a bundle of moss that she had dragged through the entrance.

"Oh Honeykit, watch where you're going!" Sorreltail chided. She turned to Leafpool and rolled her eyes. "I don't know how StarClan thought I could cope with four of them!" But her voice was warm and full of love.

Leafpool caught her breath as her belly tightened around a powerful squirming sensation. It was not the first time she had felt it, but it still made her flinch. She had figured out what the vision of three tiny stars meant half a moon ago. Bluestar, Yellowfang, Lionheart: They had all known the shadowed path that Leafpool was about to tread. And now it was as if the kits inside Leafpool were challenging her to stop lying to herself, to admit their existence and start preparing for the future.

My kits!

Not just Leafpool's kits—Crowfeather's too. And they would arrive within the next moon. *Oh, what am I going to do?*

"Are you all right?" Sorreltail was peering at her. "Do you feel ill?"

Leafpool turned away. She didn't want Sorreltail to look at her too closely; if any cat knew what an expecting she-cat looked like, it was this experienced queen. "I'm fine," she panted. "Just a little bellyache. Must have been that tough old shrew I ate yesterday." She glanced around and saw Brambleclaw's tail whisking into the warriors' den. His hunting patrol had returned. "I must go check Brambleclaw's wounds," Leafpool meowed, hurrying away. She felt Sorreltail's gaze boring into her but she didn't turn around.

Brambleclaw was lying in his nest, licking his pads. His claws were battered from digging up the fox trap and he was covered in scratches dealt by Hawkfrost, but he had insisted on going out on patrol as usual. He looked tired, though, and

Leafpool could tell by the way he held himself that he was in pain.

He brought this upon himself! I saw him in the Dark Forest with Tigerstar and Hawkfrost! They must have plotted together to catch Firestar in the trap. Leafpool couldn't explain why Brambleclaw had decided to free Firestar and kill Hawkfrost; she assumed something had gone wrong with the plan. *But I saw the circle of thorns surrounding the hollow, keeping us safe! Why can't I trust Brambleclaw now?*

"Let me see your paws," she mewed, bending over him.

With a grunt, Brambleclaw shifted and raised each foot in turn. Some of his claws were dangerously loose, and Leafpool suspected one would fall out next time he pounced on something, but there was no smell of infection. "They'd heal more quickly if you rested," she commented. Brambleclaw shrugged. "I'll send Whitepaw over with some marigold juice," Leafpool went on. "Rub it into each pad, and also the wounds in your pelt. If you have trouble sleeping, I can give you a poppy seed."

"I don't need that," Brambleclaw meowed. Leafpool turned away, eager to leave the cramped, musty space and her troubled feelings about the injured warrior.

She felt Brambleclaw's amber gaze burning into her pelt. "You can trust me now, Leafpool," he mewed.

Leafpool looked back at him. "It's not my role to judge you."

"I know you saw me in the Dark Forest with Tigerstar and Hawkfrost."

Leafpool flinched. "I can't pretend it didn't happen," she whispered.

Brambleclaw shook his head. "No, and I'm not going to deny it. But I promise that it won't happen again. Yesterday changed everything. Hawkfrost is dead—dead because of *me*! And I know where my loyalty lies now. I am the deputy of ThunderClan, and my Clan is the only thing that matters."

Suddenly the kits writhed, pushing against Leafpool's flanks so hard that she staggered.

Brambleclaw sat up. "Leafpool, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Leafpool hissed through gritted teeth. "I . . . I swallowed some mouse bile by mistake when I was treating Mousefur's ticks, that's all."

"You look like you need some fresh air," Brambleclaw meowed. "Go on, I'm fine here. Send Whitepaw with the marigold juice when you're feeling better. And get the apprentices to deal with ticks!"

Leafpool stumbled out of the den, gulping the cold, clean air as if it were water. Berrykit, Hazelkit, and Mousekit were lined up in the center of the clearing, taking turns pouncing on a stick.

"Got you, ShadowClan warrior!" Mousekit spat, baring his tiny white teeth.

Berrykit braced his front paws in the middle of the twig and pushed down until it snapped. "Death to the enemy!" he squealed.

Hazelkit was distracted by their father, Spiderleg, walking past. "This is the real enemy!" she chirped, making a grab for the black warrior's tail.

Spiderleg dropped the piece of fresh-kill he was carrying and spun around. "What are you doing?" he snapped, flicking his tail out of the way.

Hazelkit's shoulders drooped. "Only playing," she mewed.

Daisy looked out of the nursery. "Don't disturb your father!" she called. Spiderleg grunted and picked up his prey again. Leafpool saw Daisy narrow her eyes as the long-limbed black tom walked away.

Crowfeather would always be willing to play with our kits. The thought flew into Leafpool's mind before she could stop it. She pictured the dark gray warrior surrounded by three tiny shapes, letting them pounce on his tail and nibble his whiskers. In her mind, the background was blurry, and she couldn't tell whether he was framed by cliffs or the open moor where WindClan made their home. But what did it matter where they lived, as long as their kits were happy?



CHAPTER 3



Leafpool flattened her ears, feeling fury and shame battle inside her. Stop! Why are you thinking like this? You cannot have these kits!

She had already betrayed ThunderClan once by leaving them when the badgers attacked. When Cinderpelt died because Leafpool had chosen to go away with Crowfeather, Leafpool had made a vow to StarClan that she would never abandon her duties. *Wherever you are, Cinderpelt, if you can hear me, I promise that I will never leave our Clan again.*

In her belly, her kits thrashed in protest. *What about us?* they seemed to be saying. Leafpool was about to twist around and press her muzzle against her side when she realized that Daisy was watching her. She forced herself to stand up straight and trotted over to the Highledge. There was only one place she could go to think clearly.

"Firestar, I need to visit the Moonpool."

The ThunderClan leader looked surprised. "Really? Can't it wait until the half-moon? Or is there something you're not telling me?"

"Of course there isn't," Leafpool lied. "But it is important."

"Then you must go," mewed Firestar. He stretched his forepaws over the side of his nest. "Brightheart can take care of Brambleclaw's wounds while you're gone." Leafpool opened her mouth to speak but he continued, with a glint in his eye, "And I promise to stay in my den for the rest of today. Although I presume I'm allowed to poke my head out for some fresh air?"

Leafpool purred. "Only your head, nothing more!" The thought of being able to go to the Moonpool made her dizzy with relief. The StarClan warriors would show her the way forward, remind her that she was not alone and that everything would be all right.

Firestar flicked his ears. "You must leave now if you want to reach the Moonpool before darkness. Go well, and be safe."

Leafpool blinked gratefully at him. "Thank you, Firestar. I will return as soon as I can."

She ran down the tumble of rocks to the clearing, careful not to let the weight of the kits unbalance her. She found Brightheart stocking the fresh-kill pile and told her she would be away for a day, no more. Brightheart agreed to check Brambleclaw's injuries, though there was a flash of alarm in her single blue eye.

"Is everything all right, Leafpool? Has there been an omen?"

"Everything's going to be fine," Leafpool told her.

Squirrelflight dragged a blackbird up to the pile. "Are you going somewhere?"

"To the Moonpool. I need to speak with StarClan."

Squirrelflight looked up at the dark gray sky. "There's a storm on the way. Are you sure you should go alone?"

"Of course," Leafpool meowed. "StarClan will light my path."

Her sister nodded to the blackbird. "Do you want something to eat before you go?"

"No, I want to be there by nightfall." Leafpool touched her muzzle to Squirrelflight's and turned away before the she-cats could ask any more questions. In spite of the heaviness inside her belly, her steps felt light and quick. StarClan would show her what she must do!

The storm hit just as Leafpool started the rocky climb up to the hollow where the Moonpool lay. Freezing wind buffeted her fur and flung sharp pellets of hail at her until her skin was soaked and sore. Leafpool lowered her head and plodded on, sinking her claws into the mud between the rocks so the wind wouldn't blow her off the path. Inside her, the kits seemed to curl up in fear.

Don't be scared, little ones. I will keep you safe.

Leafpool was trembling so much from cold and exhaustion when she reached the top of the hollow that her paws could hardly carry her down the print-marked spiral path. She stumbled to the edge of the Moonpool, ruffled and black in the half-light, and let her body fold onto the hard stone. Waves splashed against her muzzle. Too tired to utter a prayer to StarClan, Leafpool plunged into sleep.

She opened her eyes in a warm green forest, with sunlight slicing between the branches. There was the scent of prey on the air, and the rustle of a small furry animal in a nearby patch of ferns. Leafpool looked around for the StarClan warriors she hoped to see—and saw a slender dark gray cat watching her with his head on one side.

“Your turn, Leafpool,” he prompted. He nudged a ball of moss with his forepaw. “Remember what I showed you about pouncing.”

Crowfeather! Then she was not in StarClan, but back in a memory of the time she had spent with the WindClan warrior, in the woods beyond the ThunderClan border.

Crowfeather flicked his tail. “Don’t be afraid of some moss!” he teased. “Rabbits have teeth and claws to fight back with, but this won’t hurt you.”

Leafpool crouched down and crept toward the moss. She flattened her ears, shifted her weight onto her haunches, and sprang forward with her legs outstretched. At the very last moment, Crowfeather rolled the ball of moss away with his paw and Leafpool’s claws grasped at thin air.

“Oh no!” Crowfeather purred. “It escaped!”

Leafpool whirled around and jumped onto the moss, ripping it to shreds. “Take that!” she hissed. “You won’t get away from me!” She looked up at the dark gray tom, laughter bubbling inside her. “I haven’t played this game since I was a kit!” she mewed.

Crowfeather narrowed his eyes. “I can tell!”

Leafpool launched herself at him, knocking him onto the fallen leaves. “Think I can’t hunt, hmmm? I can catch you anytime I want!” She found herself standing over him, gazing down into his blue eyes.

“I’d never run away from you,” Crowfeather whispered. “Ow!”

Leafpool jumped backward. "Did I hurt you?"

Crowfeather was sitting up and licking at the base of his spine. "No, I think I lay on a thistle."

"Let me look." Leafpool pushed his muzzle away and parted the hair on his back. "There's a tiny prickle stuck in you. Hold still . . ." She bent closer and gripped the end of the thorn in her teeth. It slid free easily, and Leafpool rubbed the spot with her paw. "There, you'll live!"

Crowfeather nuzzled her cheek. "Thank StarClan I had a medicine cat to save me!"

"Let's climb a tree!" Leafpool suggested. She walked over to a moss-covered oak and stared up at the branches.

Crowfeather padded over to join her. "I don't see why we can't stay on the ground," he muttered. "We're cats, not squirrels!"

"Come on," Leafpool urged. "You know it's not as hard as it looks, and the view from the top is worth it!" She jumped up to the lowest branch and used her front paws to haul herself onto the next one. Crowfeather followed, moving more carefully than Leafpool, but light-footed and nimble thanks to his slender frame. The branches were strong and dry, with deeply-ridged bark that made it easy to grip with their claws. Leafpool was hardly out of breath when she reached the top of the oak and broke through the leaves. Crowfeather popped out beside her, clinging so hard to the slender branch that Leafpool felt it sway beneath them.

"It's okay," she mewed. "I won't let you fall."

Crowfeather blinked. "Neither of us has wings, Leafpool, so you'll have to forgive me if I don't like how high up we are."

"But look how far we can see!"

They were on the other side of the ridge from the lake, out of sight of any of the Clan territories. In front of them, the land unrolled in dips and curves all the way to the dark line of mountains on the horizon. Here and there, Twoleg dens clustered in small reddish groups, but mostly the view was empty.

Leafpool shuffled closer to Crowfeather and leaned her head against his shoulder. His pelt smelled of grass and the breeze, with a faint hint of rabbit underneath. "There is so much land beyond our homes," she whispered.

Crowfeather rubbed his chin on the top of her head. "Somewhere out there is a place we can be together all the time. You know that, don't you, Leafpool?"

Still tucked against him, she nodded. "I wonder if we'll ever find it," she murmured.

She felt the dark gray cat tense beside her. "I would give my last breath trying," he vowed.

Suddenly a gust of wind rocked the top of the tree. In a heartbeat, Crowfeather was flung off the branch. Leafpool shrieked in horror as his body plunged downward. She tried to jump down after him, but the wind was so fierce that the branch leaped and bucked beneath her. She clung on, flattening her ears, as rain pelted against her and the forest and the view disappeared in swirling darkness.

"Help!" she wailed. "Crowfeather!"

The branch under her paws vanished and her claws scraped against cold stone. The wind faded and Leafpool realized she was standing beside the Moonpool. A pair of eyes gleamed in the shadows and a familiar scent wreathed around her.

"Spottedleaf!" she mewled in relief.

The tortoiseshell she-cat walked forward. Her pelt glowed with starlight and her eyes were like tiny yellow moons.

Leafpool felt her kits cold and unmoving in her belly. Had the journey through the storm harmed them? "Are my kits all right?" she begged.

"Yes, they are well," Spottedleaf meowed. Her voice cracked with sorrow. "Oh, Leafpool, what you have done? You foolish cat!"

Leafpool flinched, feeling the lash of Spottedleaf's tongue like a blow. "But I . . ."

"You can't make excuses," Spottedleaf warned. "It's too late for that, don't you think?"

"Spottedleaf, hush!" A thick-furred gray cat lumbered across the stone. Her flattened muzzle and stained teeth shone with the same light as her Clanmate. "Leafpool knows what she has done."

Spottedleaf narrowed her eyes. "If you can see a way out of this, you're a wiser cat than I am, Yellowfang."

The old medicine cat twitched one matted ear. "Wisdom comes in many shapes. Now, leave us alone." She pointed into

the shadows with her nose. Spottedleaf glanced once more at Leafpool, then padded away.

Leafpool crouched on the ground, not daring to move. She waited for Yellowfang to tell her how reckless she had been, how she had dishonored medicine cats everywhere. But to her surprise, she felt a rough tongue licking her head. Shaking, Leafpool let herself relax against the old she-cat.

“Oh little one,” Yellowfang rasped, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s hardly your fault,” Leafpool pointed out, her voice muffled by Yellowfang’s fur.

“You know, you’re not the first medicine cat to have this happen,” the old cat mewed.

“Really?” Leafpool was disbelieving.

Yellowfang nodded, her chin brushing Leafpool’s ears. “It happened to me, a long time ago.”

Leafpool sat up so quickly that her head banged against Yellowfang’s muzzle. “What?”

The gray-furred she-cat sighed and turned away to sit at the edge of the Moonpool. The water was still now, black and starlit like the sky. “Have you heard of Brokenstar?” she asked.

“Of course,” mewed Leafpool. “Leader of ShadowClan before Nightstar and Blackstar. He tried to destroy ThunderClan with the help of rogues.”

Yellowfang nodded. “He was my son.”

Leafpool nearly fell over. “Did any cat know?”

“Never. It was a terrible mistake, and I was punished by my secret every day of my life.”

“Is . . . is that what’s going to happen with my kits?” Leafpool whispered. “Are they a terrible mistake, too?”

Yellowfang closed her rheumy eyes. “Never say that. Life is always precious. It is what we fight for so hard, with every breath we take.”

“But medicine cats are forbidden to have kits. What I have done is wrong.” Leafpool crouched on the stone, feeling the chill seep into her paws.

“Wrong according to one code, but there are other ways to judge what we do,” Yellowfang rasped. “We are not allowed to have kits because we are supposed to love all our Clanmates equally, and the first Clan cats were afraid that we could treat our own kin ahead of any others. But when your kits are born,

Leafpool, you will learn that your heart has space in it to love more than you could possibly imagine. Loving your kits does not mean you have less love for your Clan.”

“Then the code should be different?” Leafpool mewed hopefully.

Yellowfang lashed her tail. “I did not say that. The code of the medicine cats is there to remind us of our duties. We cannot change it, any more than we can change the seasons.”

Leafpool felt a faint stirring in her belly, and she curled her tail protectively around her flank. “Is there any chance my Clanmates will accept these kits?”

“ThunderClan lives and breathes the warrior code. I cannot promise they will forgive you. But your Clanmates have suffered so much these past few moons, nothing should matter more to you than staying with them.” The old cat’s gaze softened. “Your kits need not follow the same path as mine. If they believe that they are wanted and loved from the moment they take their first breath, they will have a chance to grow into strong, loyal, kind warriors.” She looked down at her paws. “My mistake was to give Brokenstar to a cat who did not love him, who resented every mouthful of milk he took from her.”

“Please help me!” Leafpool begged. “I want to serve my Clan, but I cannot make these kits disappear!”

Yellowfang stood up and started to walk back to the shadows. “You’ll have to be smarter than I was, that’s all.”

Leafpool opened her mouth to protest. But there was a rush of wind and darkness, and when she opened her eyes she was lying beside the Moonpool with her babies wriggling inside her as if they were tired of lying on the cold ground. Leafpool heaved herself to her paws. StarClan had spoken clearly: Her duty was to remain as ThunderClan’s medicine cat. But how, when there was no way to keep these kits secret?

Leafpool knew she had to confide in a living cat. And there was only one she could think of: a cat from whom love and happiness spilled out. Surely there would be enough to spare for some helpless kits? And this was the cat Leafpool had been closest to all her life, even when they were far apart. . . .



CHAPTER 4



“Squirrelflight, do you have a moment? I need to speak with you.”

The dark ginger she-cat turned and looked at Leafpool. “Can’t it wait?” Her pelt was ruffled and her green eyes shone with temper. “Brambleclaw wants me to fetch soaked moss for the nursery, even though it’s an apprentice task. He hasn’t stopped giving out orders since Firestar made him deputy!”

“I could come with you,” Leafpool offered.

Squirrelflight twitched her ears. “Okay, if there’s really nothing more important you need to do.”

They passed Mousefur on the way to the entrance. The elderly she-cat eyed Leafpool’s belly. “Plenty of mice at the Moonpool, was there? You’re looking plump, Leafpool!”

Leafpool flinched and tried to tuck in her flanks. “StarClan has been generous with prey this leaf-bare,” she mewed, speeding up.

Once they had pushed their way through the thorns, Squirrelflight looked at Leafpool. “Wow, that was rude of Mousefur! She’s right, though. Have you been taking more than your fair share?” Her tone was gentle and amused, but Leafpool felt hot beneath her pelt.

“I’d never do that,” she meowed. She plunged into the ferns and headed down the slope toward the lake. The cool fronds brushed against her sides and made her feel calm again. Behind her, Squirrelflight was muttering.

“Who does Brambleclaw think he is, treating me like I’m still wet behind my ears? Toms are so much trouble! You don’t know

how lucky you are, Leafpool, not having to worry about things like that.” She broke off as she drew alongside her sister. “Well, I know there was Crowfeather . . .”

Leafpool didn’t say anything. They emerged from the trees onto the edge of the lakeshore. Pebbles crunched under their paws, and in front of them stretched the lake, flat and silver.

Squirrelflight trotted ahead. “There’s a good clump of moss up here,” she called. “It won’t take long to soak some and take it back to the camp. I’m tempted to put it in Brambleclaw’s nest,” she added under her breath.

Leafpool waited until her sister had stopped by a fallen tree and was prodding at the thick growth of moss. Her heart was pounding and her pelt felt strange and prickly. Inside her, the kits were still, as if they were waiting. *I have no choice*, Leafpool reminded herself.

“I need your help, Squirrelflight,” she began.

The ginger she-cat paused and looked up. “Sure. Do you want me to fetch some herbs for you?” She pulled a face. “You don’t need me to collect mouse bile, do you?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Squirrelflight’s eyes widened. “Do you want me to take a message to Crowfeather? Leafpool, you know I can’t do that!”

Leafpool winced and closed her eyes for a moment. *This is something Crowfeather must never find out!*

Stones rolled beneath Squirrelflight’s paws as she shifted her weight. “What is it, Leafpool? It’s obviously important.” She let out a sigh. “I always used to know what you were thinking, but recently—since . . . since the Crowfeather thing—it’s as if you’re hiding from me. Is something wrong? What is so terrible that you can’t tell me? I’m your sister!”

Leafpool gazed out across the lake. Three tiny dots of light were dancing on the water, even though the sky above was gray with clouds.

“I’m expecting kits.”

“You’re *what*?” Squirrelflight jumped down from the fallen tree and faced her sister. “Are they Crowfeather’s?”

“Of course they are,” Leafpool snapped.

“Yes, of course.” Squirrelflight stared at her in dismay. “Are you going to leave again? I’ll miss you so much! Who’ll be our medicine cat instead?”

Leafpool lifted her head. "I am ThunderClan's medicine cat," she meowed. "Nothing is more important than that. Squirrelflight, you have to help me find a way to raise these kits and still serve my Clan!"

Squirrelflight took a step back. "That's impossible!"

"Without me, ThunderClan won't have a medicine cat," Leafpool insisted. "There's not enough time to train an apprentice, and there are still wounds to be treated from the badger fight!"

Squirrelflight's eyes were troubled. "Other cats can take over your duties. Brightheart knows about herbs, doesn't she? You don't have to be a medicine cat, Leafpool. Everyone will get used to the idea eventually. It's not like our Clanmates don't know about you and Crowfeather."

"ThunderClan needs *me* to be their medicine cat. I cannot have these kits!"

Squirrelflight looked at Leafpool's swollen belly. "I don't think you have a choice right now." She moved closer and Leafpool felt the warmth of her sister's breath against her cheek. "I'll help you as much as I can, I promise," Squirrelflight murmured. "Everything will be okay."

Leafpool looked at the tiny points of light being tossed on the lake, fragile and churned by the waves. *Oh, Squirrelflight, you don't understand. Nothing will ever be okay again.*



CHAPTER 5



Leafpool looked up as Berrykit limped into the nursery. “What is it this time?” she mewed.

Hazelkit’s head popped up behind her brother. “He stood on a giant thistle!” she squeaked. “His paw is full of prickles!”

Berrykit miserably held up his forepaw. He screwed up his eyes and twisted his head away. “Will I ever be able to hunt?” he whimpered.

Leafpool studied the tiny pink foot. She could just see the tip of a thorn, no bigger than a mouse’s whisker, in one of the pads. “I think you’ll be okay,” she meowed.

“Can I come in?” called a voice from the entrance. It was Brightheart, rolling a bundle of cobwebs in front of her. “Here you are,” she puffed, tucking them into a little cleft in the stone wall. “I found loads under a piece of old bark by the shore.”

“Thanks,” mewed Leafpool. “While you’re here, would you like to extract a gigantic thorn from this brave little warrior?”

Brightheart blinked. “Sure, if you want me to.” She squinted down at Berrykit’s paw. “Wow, that’s huge! Okay, hold still.”

Berrykit leaned against Hazelkit as Brightheart bent over his foot and nipped out the prickle. She spat it onto a leaf and straightened up. “All done,” she declared.

“Did it hurt?” Hazelkit asked.

Berrykit nodded. “A bit. But I’m nearly a warrior, so I don’t mind. Thanks, Brightheart!” With a flick of his stumpy tail, he trotted out of the den with his sister.

Brightheart watched them leave, then turned to Leafpool. “Is

there something you want to tell me?" she meowed, her single eye wide with concern. In the half-light of the den, the ginger patches of fur glowed against her white pelt.

Leafpool flinched. "What do you mean?"

"So far today I've treated an infected tick wound on Mousefur, sorted out the last of our yarrow stocks, collected cobwebs, and now dealt with the smallest thorn I've ever seen. You know I never mind helping you, Leafpool, but any cat would think you wanted me to be your apprentice!"

"How would you feel about that?" Leafpool mewed quietly.

Brightheart purred. "I'm flattered to be asked, but what about Cloudtail and Whitepaw? I am a mother and a mate, and I don't want to give that up. No, Leafpool, you made a brave decision to follow your destiny, especially after the . . . the Crowfeather incident. But I am very happy as I am. I love helping you and I hope that never changes, but you'll have to look to these new litters of kits for an apprentice. With so many of them, it won't be hard!"

She ducked under the brambles at the entrance and vanished into the cold sunshine. Leafpool stood in the middle of her den. She had never felt more alone in her life. Then her kits stirred inside her, and she reminded herself that the problem was that she *wasn't* alone. She felt a flash of anger toward her unborn kits. *Why did you have to come? Your father doesn't even know you exist. You're going to ruin everything!*

Three sunrises passed. Sleepless and feverish with fear, Leafpool watched each one appear over the tops of the trees. She felt exhausted, weighed down by her belly, and frightened to spend much time out of her den in case her Clanmates realized what was going on. In particular she hid from Mousefur, sending Brightheart to the elders' den to check the old she-cat's infection. They hadn't discussed the issue of a new apprentice again.

Leafpool was counting out her stock of poppy seeds when there was a commotion in the clearing. She stuck her head out and saw Cloudtail carrying Whitepaw's still, pale body on his shoulders. The rest of the dawn patrol clustered around them.

Thornclaw broke away and yowled, "Leafpool, come quick! Whitepaw is hurt!"

Brighthouse flew out of the warriors' den. "What's going on?" She helped Cloudtail lower their daughter to the ground. "Whitepaw! Wake up!"

Leafpool ran over. "Stand back, Brighthouse," she mewed gently. "Let me see her."

Brighthouse stepped away and pressed herself against Cloudtail. "Our baby!" she whimpered.

The little white cat lay very still, her breathing shallow and her heartbeat weak. Leafpool looked up at Brackenfur, who was staring at his apprentice in distress. "Tell me exactly what happened," she ordered.

The golden brown warrior narrowed his eyes. "She was practicing for her final assessment. A hare crossed the WindClan border and Whitepaw went for it. She caught it, but it struggled and got away. By the time I reached her, she was like this." His voice shook.

Sorreltail padded up behind him, having heard the commotion from the nursery, and rested her tail on his shoulder to comfort him. "It wasn't your fault," she murmured.

Leafpool traced the outline of Whitepaw's body with her paws, feeling for broken bones. There was a swelling on Whitepaw's jaw which felt hot to the touch. "Did the hare strike her face?"

Thornclaw nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"That's what has knocked her out," Leafpool mewed. "I'm guessing it was a large animal?"

"Massive," Brackenfur confirmed. "I can't believe Whitepaw thought she could take it."

Brighthouse let out a gasp. "My poor brave kit!"

Leafpool continued her examination. She hoped Whitepaw would wake up on her own, but she needed to check if there were any other injuries. Her legs seemed fine but there was something wrong with the angle of her tail. . . .

"I think she's dislocated her tail," Leafpool announced.

Cloudtail blinked. "Is that possible?"

"It's rare, but I've heard of it happening." Leafpool prodded the base of Whitepaw's spine, feeling the joint crunch. Whitepaw stirred.

"She's waking up!" cried Brighthouse. "Does that mean she's in pain?"

Leafpool nodded. "Putting her tail back will hurt a lot."

"Then you have to give her something to sleep through it!" Brightheart insisted. "Shall I fetch poppy seeds?"

Leafpool thought for a moment. Poppy seeds would make Whitepaw sleep more deeply, and if she had already been knocked out, would that be dangerous? She wanted the apprentice to wake up as soon as possible and indicate if she was in pain anywhere else. "No," she meowed at last. "The pain won't last long, and if it helps to rouse Whitepaw, that might be a good thing." Brightheart let out a yelp of dismay but Leafpool ignored her. "Thornclaw, fetch a stick and put it between Whitepaw's jaws in case she bites down. Brackenfur, hold her hindquarters steady like this." She demonstrated by placing her paws firmly on Whitepaw's haunches. The little cat let out a murmur.

Brackenfur gritted his teeth and followed Leafpool's directions. "You'll have to be quite strong," Leafpool warned. "Her tail might not go back easily."

She realized her paws were trembling. She tried to picture the skeletons of shrews and rabbits that Cinderpelt had used to demonstrate the way bones fitted together. For a moment she hesitated, terrified that she was going to damage the apprentice even more.

Brackenfur murmured in her ear, "I know you can do this, Leafpool. Go on."

Leafpool took a deep breath and curled one paw over Whitepaw's tail, close to the tip. She rested her other paw on the base of the little cat's spine. With Brackenfur holding the haunches steady, Leafpool began to twist the tail. Whitepaw's eyes stayed shut but she let out a dreadful screech. Brightheart lurched forward but Cloudtail held her back. Brackenfur grunted with the effort of holding Whitepaw still. Leafpool kept up the pressure until she felt a tiny click underneath Whitepaw's fur. Suddenly the tail relaxed in her paw and Whitepaw gave a small sigh.

"You did it!" breathed Brightheart.

Whitepaw shivered and opened her eyes. "Where am I?" she mewed.

"You're safe," Brightheart told her. She ran her paw over Whitepaw's head. "Leafpool has fixed your tail."

"My mouth hurts," Whitepaw whimpered. The swelling on her jaw was making it difficult for her to speak.

"Perhaps next time you see a hare you'll let it run away," Leafpool mewed. "You'll have a nasty bump there for a little while, but I can give you something to help with the pain. Thornclaw, Brackenfur, carry Whitepaw into my den. I'll send Birchpaw to fetch clean moss and feathers for her nest."

Thornclaw carefully eased Whitepaw onto her mentor's shoulders and with Brightheart holding her steady, they made their way to the cleft in the rock.

"You did very well, my dear," commented a voice behind Leafpool.

"Sandstorm!" she meowed. She hadn't realized her mother had been watching.

"I'm so proud of you," Sandstorm mewed, her green eyes glowing. "You even managed to keep Brightheart calm."

"No queen wants to see her kits in pain," Leafpool meowed.

"Of course not," Sandstorm agreed. She took a step forward and let her tail tip fall against Leafpool's flank. "Even when her kits are grown up, a she-cat is always a mother." Her breath was warm and sweet scented. "Are you all right, Leafpool?" she murmured. "You seem distracted at the moment, as if something is troubling you. You can tell me anything, you know."

No I can't! Leafpool felt a tiny quiver inside her, and suddenly she wanted to get out of the hollow, away from Sandstorm's too-close questions, from her mother's knowledge of what an expecting she-cat looked and smelled like. "I need to fetch fresh stocks of yarrow," she meowed. "Tell Brightheart to stay beside Whitepaw, but she mustn't give her any poppy seeds. I won't be long."

Sandstorm nodded, looking troubled, but she didn't try to stop her. Leafpool turned to push her way out of the barrier of thorns. Without thinking, she headed up the slope toward the ridge. There was yarrow closer to the camp, beside the lake, but her paws carried her to the plants that grew along the edge of the stream on the border with WindClan. She breathed in the scents of moorland and rabbit, and felt the kits shift inside her. *Do they know this is where their father comes from?*

She had just nipped through a fleshy yarrow stalk when she heard the sounds of cats approaching on the other side of the

stream. A WindClan patrol! Leafpool poked her head up to see four cats racing over the grass. Crowfeather was leading, his dark gray fur flitting like a shadow across the ground. A black she-cat ran close beside him, matching his stride.

Leafpool bolted out of the stream and ducked under a holly bush. The prickly leaves grazed her fur as she crawled out of sight. She knew she had done nothing wrong, crossed no boundaries, taken nothing that belonged to WindClan, but she wasn't ready to face her neighbors' scrutiny, not so soon. She heard the WindClan cats pause to renew scent marks, then continue on up the hill. Leafpool waited for a few moments, then wriggled out and shook bits of twig from her fur.

She returned to the stream and was dragging the bitten stalk of yarrow up the bank when a voice startled her.

"Did you think I hadn't noticed you? I'd know your scent anywhere!"

Leafpool dropped the stalk, which fell into the stream with a splash. "Crowfeather! What are you doing? Where is your patrol?"

"I sent them on to check the marks beyond the ridge." Crowfeather's blue eyes were huge and searching. "I . . . I wanted to see how you were."

Leafpool took a step back from the bank. "I'm fine. Busy, as you can see."

Suddenly Crowfeather leaped across the stream. His scent wafted over Leafpool and the nearness of him made her want to press against his shoulder and feel the warmth of his pelt. "I have missed you," he whispered, so close she could feel his breath on her muzzle. "I need you with me. I wish things could be different."

"I wish that too," Leafpool mewed. "More than you could possibly know." She pictured Whitepaw's frail body lying in the clearing, Mousefur's seeping tick wound, Berrykit's pricked foot. These were the cats that really needed her. She straightened up. "But we can't change anything, Crowfeather. It's over. I am ThunderClan's medicine cat, until the day I join StarClan."

She felt Crowfeather pull away and stare at her. *Did he think he could go back to the way things were? Whatever happens now is my destiny, and mine alone. He cannot be part of it!* "I think you should leave," she meowed. "Your patrol will come looking for

you soon. Do you want them to doubt your loyalty all over again?"

Crowfeather blinked. "I thought we didn't care what our Clanmates believed about us."

"Well, I do," Leafpool meowed. "Go back to your Clan, Crowfeather. I won't let you ruin everything again."

It was as if she had struck the WindClan warrior a physical blow. He flinched away with hurt in his eyes. "If that's what you really want," he murmured.

"It is," Leafpool growled. Inside her, the kits squirmed so fiercely that Leafpool was convinced Crowfeather would see. *Can they hear me sending their father away? Oh, little ones, what choice do I have? If I lose my place in ThunderClan, we will have nothing!*

Crowfeather jumped over the stream. He gazed back at her and opened his mouth to speak but the sound of rapid paw steps made them look up the hill. His patrol was racing toward them. Leafpool whisked around and dived back under the holly bush. She peeped out to see the patrol circling around Crowfeather. The black she-cat pressed close to him, twining her tail with his. When she spoke, Leafpool recognized her as Nightcloud, a WindClan warrior who had never been friendly toward ThunderClan.

"Is everything okay?" Nightcloud was asking. "Who were you talking to?"

"No one important," Crowfeather grunted, and Leafpool felt her heart crack. "Come on, let's finish the patrol."

The WindClan cats bounded away. Leafpool crawled out of her hiding place. *No one important? Well, it looks as if Nightcloud is the important one now.* Had Crowfeather lied about wanting to go back to the way things were? His life seemed to have moved on already, and his Clanmates didn't look like they doubted his loyalty. Leafpool was alone with her kits—by choice or accident.

The StarClan cats said they couldn't tell me what to do, but Yellowfang must know something that might help. I'll go back to her, remind her that she lived through this herself, and beg for advice. I cannot do this on my own!



CHAPTER 6



Brightheart stayed with Whitepaw all night, which made the den a little crowded, but Leafpool was glad of the help when the apprentice kept waking in pain from her jaw and the dull ache in her tail. She still didn't dare give Whitepaw any poppy seeds, so Brightheart curled herself around her daughter and licked the top of her head, urging her back to sleep. By sunrise both cats were dozing, so Leafpool tiptoed out of the den to fetch them something from the fresh-kill pile in case they woke up hungry.

Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw were just returning with the dawn patrol, purring in amusement at something Rainwhisker had said. It looked like their quarrel had been long forgotten. Leafpool joined her sister as Brambleclaw bounded up the Highledge to report to Firestar.

"Will you come to the Moonpool with me?" Leafpool asked. "I need to speak with StarClan and I don't want to go alone." Leafpool risked a glance at her cumbersome belly. "Obviously."

Squirrelflight nodded. "All right, I'll come. Do you want to go now?"

"If we can. Brightheart can take care of Whitepaw for today."

"Let me tell Firestar and Brambleclaw first." Squirrelflight trotted up the rocks and vanished into the leader's den. Leafpool felt the kits sagging inside her and thought with dread of the long trek up to the Moonpool.

Squirrelflight reappeared. "That's all fine. Come on, then." She looked up at the sky. It was cloudy, but as pale as a dove's

wing. "At least we shouldn't get wet."

She was right, it didn't rain, but the journey was harder than Leafpool had ever found it before. Every stone seemed to roll away from her paws, every bramble reached out to snag her fur, and the weight of her belly made her gasp for breath. Squirrelflight slowed her pace to walk beside her, boosting her up the rocks and urging her on when all Leafpool wanted to do was lie down and rest.

At last they reached the path that led down to the Moonpool. Squirrelflight stared into the hollow in astonishment. Dusk was falling, and pricks of starlight were starting to appear on the still, silver water. "It's beautiful!" she whispered.

Unlike in the old forest, apprentices no longer visited the medicine cats' special place as part of their training. This was Squirrelflight's first sight of the Moonpool, and Leafpool felt a flush of delight at her sister's reaction. "Isn't it?" she agreed. "Can you feel the marks in the path?"

Squirrelflight rubbed her paws over the dimpled stone and nodded.

"Those are the paw prints of all the cats who have come here before us," Leafpool explained. "We are not the first cats to know of this special place."

"Wow," Squirrelflight breathed. "I feel so honored to be here."

"I know what you mean," meowed Leafpool. "Follow me. I need to lie at the water's edge." She padded down the spiral path with her sister close behind her. The stars sparkled more brightly in the pool as they approached. Leafpool sank with a grunt of relief onto the cold stone.

"What happens now?" Squirrelflight asked, sitting down and looking around.

"I will share tongues with StarClan in my sleep. You should sleep too, if you can. It's a long walk home."

Squirrelflight settled down, grumbling about the hardness of the ground. Gradually her breathing slowed. Leafpool nudged a little closer to soak up the warmth of her sister's fur, then closed her eyes. She opened them to find Yellowfang standing over her. The old cat's gray pelt was as ruffled as ever, and her breath rasped so loudly that it echoed off the walls of the hollow.

"Back again?" Yellowfang grunted.

Leafpool struggled to her paws. "Please help me, Yellowfang. Everything seems so dark. I can't find a way out of this anywhere."

The old cat sat down with a sigh. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Leafpool. If only you had thought about the consequences of what you were doing."

"Well, I didn't!" Leafpool flashed back. "I can say I'm sorry until the lake runs dry, but that won't change a thing. Please help me decide what to do! There's no one else I can ask!"

To her surprise, Yellowfang didn't reply. Instead she leaned over and prodded Squirrelflight with one paw. Squirrelflight lifted her head blearily.

"Is it time to leave? I only just closed my eyes." Her gaze fell on Yellowfang. "Oh! You're from StarClan, aren't you?"

Yellowfang twitched her ears, which glowed with starlight. "It would seem so. Do you know who I am?"

Squirrelflight put her head on one side. "I'd guess you are Yellowfang. I've heard many stories about you." She studied the old cat's matted, dusty pelt and her nose twitched. "I'd know you anywhere."

"I am flattered," Yellowfang commented dryly.

Squirrelflight stood up and looked from Yellowfang to Leafpool and back again. "Why am I here? Is there a way I can help Leafpool raise her kits?"

"Yes," mewed Yellowfang. "You can take them and raise them as your own."

Squirrelflight looked horrified. "What? How could I do that? I would have to lie to Firestar, to all my Clanmates, to *Brambleclaw*!"

The old medicine cat blinked. "If a lie is what it takes to save these kits, so be it."

Squirrelflight paced in a tight circle. "I'm sorry. I just can't see how I could do this. It's too much."

"I can't make you do anything that you don't want to," Yellowfang rasped. "I understand why you don't want such a huge responsibility—not that I could appreciate it, of course, being a medicine cat."

Leafpool stiffened. So Yellowfang wasn't going to tell Squirrelflight about her own terrible history?

"But I have watched you, Squirrelflight," Yellowfang continued, her voice barely louder than the wind against the stone. "I know you would make an excellent mother." Her cloudy yellow gaze drifted to the Moonpool, which was being whipped into little waves by the breeze. Her ears pricked, as if she had seen something in the water. She blinked, then turned back to Squirrelflight. "I am so sorry," she whispered.

Squirrelflight stared at her, huge-eyed. "Sorry about what?"

The old she-cat sighed. "I wish that the stars had not sent this message to me to pass on. But it is my duty. Squirrelflight, you will never have kits of your own."

Leafpool gulped. *What?*

Her sister rocked backward on her haunches. "Are you sure? How can you possibly know that?"

"Are you questioning StarClan?" Yellowfang hissed. Then she let her fur lie flat again. "Leafpool is offering you your only chance to be a mother. And Brambleclaw will be a great father. One day he will be the leader of ThunderClan! He needs kits to follow in his paw steps, don't you think?"

Leafpool held her breath. Squirrelflight stood up and walked to the edge of the Moonpool, where she gazed at the starlight rippling on the surface. Yellowfang followed her. "I know how difficult this is to hear. Come and rest. You will see things more clearly when you wake up." She guided Squirrelflight back to the warm patch of stone where she had been lying before. Squirrelflight curled up, as silent and obedient as a kit, and let Yellowfang soothe her to sleep with long, smooth licks across her head.

Leafpool waited until her sister was fast asleep, then stood up. "StarClan has never seen the future in the Moonpool before," she meowed quietly. "Were you telling the truth?"

Yellowfang kept her gaze fixed on Squirrelflight's head. "The truth is that Squirrelflight will make a far better mother for these kits than you will, Leafpool. That is the only thing which matters now."

Leafpool tried to speak but a feather-soft darkness tugged at her, pulling her back into sleep. She lay down and let her eyes close as Yellowfang's glowing shape faded away. When Leafpool woke, Squirrelflight was standing beside the Moonpool. Without looking around, she mewed, "Do you remember our dream?"

“Yes,” Leafpool whispered. Her legs were trembling. *Was Squirrelflight really going to take these kits from her?* If it meant they could stay in ThunderClan and she could watch them grow, while still serving as a medicine cat, perhaps it was the only answer.

Squirrelflight turned to face her, and her eyes were soft with sadness. “I love you, Leafpool, and I will keep my promise to help you. But I can’t lie to Brambleclaw for the rest of his life, nor to Firestar, Sandstorm and all our Clanmates. I’m so sorry, but I can’t do this for you.”



CHAPTER 7



The sky had lightened as much as it was going to by the time Leafpool and Squirrelflight reached the hollow. Leafpool felt dizzy with fatigue, and had been leaning on her sister's shoulder for most of the journey. She had to walk into the clearing on her own, though. She couldn't risk any of her Clanmates seeing how weak and breathless she was. She headed straight for her den, and was relieved to find Whitepaw sleeping peacefully.

Brightheart was sitting beside her daughter, rolling up the newly dried yarrow leaves. "She's in less pain today," she commented. She peered at Leafpool. "You look worn out! You needn't have traveled back overnight. I could have seen to Whitepaw today."

Leafpool sank down into her nest. "I know, but we didn't want to sleep on the mountain. Why don't you go get something to eat now?"

The she-cat glanced at her once more, then padded out of the den. Leafpool stretched out as flat as she could with her belly propped awkwardly beside her. *No more journeys to the Moonpool, little ones. StarClan has done as much as it can for us. Perhaps Yellowfang was right, and giving you to Squirrelflight was the only way to keep us here. But if Squirrelflight doesn't want to, then we will have to find our own path.*

She smoothed her paw over the uncomfortable swelling. She knew the kits would come in the next quarter-moon. She would have to leave the camp in time to find a safe place to give birth. After that, she had no idea what would happen. If her

Clanmates refused to accept her kits, she would have to give up her place in ThunderClan forever. Other cats had left, so Leafpool knew she could survive. It would be hard to hunt for food while the kits were still nursing, but Leafpool could cope with going hungry for a while. She would eat as much as she could from the fresh-kill pile before she left, and hope that none of her Clanmates were watching too closely.

By the following sunrise, Whitepaw was sitting up in her nest and complaining strongly about not being allowed out of the den. It was the best sign so far of her recovery. Brightheart knew better than to fuss over her daughter, and instead surveyed her from a distance, offering food and soaked moss in between the complaints.

Leafpool beckoned Brightheart farther into the cave with a twitch of her tail. "Would you mind if I left the camp for a while?" she asked.

Brightheart's single eye stretched wide. "Is something wrong?"

"I . . . I have to go in search of an herb that doesn't grow in our territory. StarClan told me to go when I visited the Moonpool."

"Are we going to be struck by greencough this leaf-bare?" Brightheart mewed worriedly.

Leafpool shook her head. "Not that I have heard. Will you take care of my duties while I'm gone?"

"Of course," the she-cat mewed. "But don't stay away too long, Leafpool. We need you here."

Firestar was less easy to convince. "Is StarClan sure that we need this herb?"

"Completely." Leafpool felt her pelt crawl. She hated lying to any of her Clanmates but especially her father, who trusted her to interpret the signs from their ancestors. She wondered if StarClan would forgive her for using them falsely.

"Then you'll have to go, of course," Firestar meowed. "Did StarClan say how long it might take to find this plant?"

Leafpool swallowed. "I might be away for more than a moon."

The ginger tom blinked. "A moon? This herb must be very important."

Sandstorm entered the leader's den in time to overhear. "Do you have to go, Leafpool? Couldn't it wait until after leaf-bare?" Her voice was gentle, but the words burned into Leafpool's fur. *Does she know why I have to leave?*

"No, it can't wait," she insisted. She gazed at her father. "StarClan wouldn't send me away if there was any danger to my Clanmates. I promise I will come back as soon as I can."

Firestar twitched his tail. "And you have to go alone, do you?"

Leafpool nodded, but at that moment Squirrelflight burst into the den. "No, she doesn't! I'm going with her!"

Leafpool stared at her sister. Squirrelflight continued, "Is it true, what Brightheart said? That you're leaving ThunderClan?"

"Only for a while," Leafpool whispered.

"Then I'll come with you," Squirrelflight meowed.

"I'd be happier if you weren't alone," Firestar admitted.

"So would I," Sandstorm murmured.

"You may go if you take Squirrelflight with you," Firestar meowed, as if that was his final decision.

Leafpool glanced at her sister, whose jaw jutted in determination, and nodded. "Very well. Thank you, Firestar."

He rested his muzzle briefly on top of her head, then watched her walk out of the den. At the bottom of the stones, Leafpool turned to Squirrelflight. "You know why I'm going, don't you?"

Squirrelflight nodded. "Yes, and I am keeping my promise to help you however I can."

"Have you told Brambleclaw?"

"That I'm going away with you for a while? Yes." Squirrelflight curled her lip. "He tried to persuade me to stay here and let Thornclaw or Rainwhisker go instead, but I said that you had asked for me."

Leafpool suddenly felt exhausted by the lies, the half-truths, the weight of the secret that dragged in her belly. "I'm glad you are coming," she murmured.

Squirrelflight touched Leafpool's ear with the tip of her tail. "I could never let you go through this alone."

They left just before sunhigh, not that the sun was visible through the dense yellow clouds that hung above the tops of the trees. Brambleclaw curled his tail with Squirrelflight's and

seemed to be trying to persuade her to change her mind. But Squirrelflight shrugged him off.

"I'm sure you can organize the patrols without me," she teased. But her voice was high-pitched with tension, and Leafpool knew that her sister was frightened of what lay ahead. There was nothing she could say to reassure Squirrelflight. The future yawned before her like a bottomless chasm. The path ahead of her led straight into the dark.

They headed up to the ridge above the hollow and crossed over the ThunderClan border as soon as they could. Now that they were on their way, Leafpool had a strange urge inside her to get as far from her home as she could, as if the whispers of her Clanmates could still be heard all around her. In spite of her swollen belly, she walked quickly, and Squirrelflight sometimes had to trot to keep up.

"What's the hurry?" she panted.

Leafpool just looked at her. Squirrelflight ducked her head with embarrassment. "Okay, let's keep going."

The dense undergrowth and fresh young trees that Leafpool associated with ThunderClan territory gave way to sparser, older trees, their trunks silvery and scaled with lichen. The bracken thinned out and soft grass lay underpaw. They could have moved faster here, but Leafpool's paws were starting to ache and instead she slowed down. Squirrelflight said nothing, just matched her pace and stayed close enough to support Leafpool with her shoulder when the medicine cat stumbled.

Peering through the lake toward the trees, Leafpool figured they were almost level with ShadowClan territory by now. She hoped the breeze wouldn't carry their scent across the border. They were skirting a thicket of elderberry bushes when Squirrelflight let out a soft cry.

"Look! There's an old Twoleg nest!" She ran forward and slipped inside the tumbledown heap of reddish stones. Leafpool studied it. If Twolegs had ever lived here, it had been a long time ago. There were holes in the roof, and ivy sprouted from the stones as if the den were trying to grow itself a pelt.

Squirrelflight reappeared at the entrance. "We could shelter here for the night," she mewed. "It's dry inside, and there's a good smell of mouse."

Leafpool padded over and peered into the den. It was filled

with shadows but it felt warm without the constant tug of the wind. Squirrelflight trotted past her and started nosing through a pile of old straw. "You know, this would make a great place to have your kits. It's clean enough and dry, there's plenty of prey, and we're not too far from the Clans if anything goes wrong."

Leafpool cut her off with a hiss. "We cannot ask any Clan cat for help! And this is much too close to the territories; we might be seen or heard. No, we can't stay here."

With a sense of panic swelling inside her, and her kits writhing in distress, she ran away from the abandoned den. Squirrelflight followed without trying to argue. Leafpool was grateful for her sister's silence. She couldn't explain the strange, fierce feelings that surged inside her the closer it came to her kits arriving. All she knew was that the urge to follow her instincts was too strong to fight.

The trees toward the lake grew thinner and Leafpool glimpsed the stretch of open grass where Twolegs came during greenleaf. The cats reached a narrow, steep-banked stream which bubbled down to the shore. Squirrelflight paused on the bank.

"I guess you don't feel like jumping across?" she mewed.

Leafpool shook her head, too breathless to speak.

Squirrelflight narrowed her eyes. "You can't go much further. Come on, we'll head deeper into the woods and find somewhere to spend the night." She turned and led the way along the stream. As the trees thickened around them, the sounds of birds and rustling prey died away, and Leafpool felt as if they were the only living creatures in the forest. It started to rain, gently at first but then harder, until the cats were drenched to the skin. Leafpool shivered uncontrollably, and the sound of her chattering teeth competed with the raindrops that spattered around them.

Suddenly Squirrelflight halted and scented the air. "I smell rabbit," she announced. She veered away from the edge of the stream and plunged into the dripping ferns. "Follow me, Leafpool," she called over her shoulder. "I'm not leaving you on your own!"

Leafpool was too tired and uncomfortable to argue. She stumbled behind her sister along the faint trail of scent. They emerged from the ferns in a sandy clearing dotted with holes.

Rabbit burrows! Leafpool saw Squirrelflight lick her lips in anticipation of the hunt.

But there was another scent here, stronger than rabbit, only half disguised by the rain. Not rabbit but . . .

“Fox!” gasped Squirrelflight, whirling around. “Quick, let’s get out of here!”

It was too late. In front of them the bracken shook violently and tore apart to reveal—not a fox, but the pointed, striped face of a badger, little eyes gleaming and jaws parted to reveal slavering yellow teeth. It growled when it saw the cats.

Squirrelflight jumped in front of Leafpool. “Wait until it attacks me, then run!” she hissed.

Leafpool crouched down, ready to flee. Her kits squirmed in her stomach as if they could feel her terror. Leafpool felt such a surge of love for her babies that she rocked on her paws. She glared at the badger and felt her lip curl in fury. If she couldn’t get away, then she would stay and fight. Badgers held no fear for her now.

You will not harm my kits!



CHAPTER 8



The badger took one step forward and lowered its head, ready to charge. Suddenly there was a ferocious roar behind them and Leafpool glanced around to see a big red fox explode from the nearest burrow. For a moment Leafpool waited to be crushed between fox and badger. Then there was a rush of stinking air as the fox leaped over her head and launched itself at the black-and-white intruder. Squirrelflight threw herself against Leafpool and bundled her into the nearest burrow. Around them, the ground shook and sand fell from the walls as the two animals battled outside. The she-cats crawled deeper into the burrow and curled into a corner, huge-eyed with terror, too frightened to speak.

At last they heard the fox bark in triumph, and the sound of the badger lumbering away. Leafpool began to stand up but Squirrelflight stopped her. “Wait,” she urged in a whisper. “We won’t be able to find shelter in the dark, and it’s still raining. It’s dry inside, and the tunnel is too small for the fox to follow us down. I think we should stay here for the night.”

Leafpool stared at her sister in alarm. Sleep next to a fox hole? Had Squirrelflight lost her mind? But then she saw the exhaustion in her sister’s eyes, and knew that Squirrelflight couldn’t walk another step. From the scent of blood drifting down the burrow, she guessed that the fox had been badly hurt, hopefully enough to make it lose any interest in hunting a couple of cats. “Okay,” she meowed, lying down again. “Let’s get some rest.”

Squirreflight fell asleep almost at once and began to snore gently, just audible above the patter of rain overhead. The kits in Leafpool's belly were wide awake, wriggling and wrestling to change position, and sleep seemed a long way off. With a grunt, Leafpool hauled herself to her paws. If she stayed here, tossing and twitching, she would disturb Squirreflight. A cold breeze whispered down the burrow, making Leafpool reluctant to go outside. Instead she turned deeper into the tunnel, carefully testing with her whiskers to see where the walls were.

A tiny beam of moonlight shone through a hole in the roof ahead of her, casting a silvery gleam onto the sand below. Leafpool padded forward and found herself at the opening to a much larger burrow. The scent of fox almost sent her fleeing back to the open air, but she steadied herself and peered into the half-light. The big fox was here, smelling of blood and anger, but fast asleep now. Her body was curled around three cubs, each not much larger than a kit. In spite of her wounds, the she-fox had tucked them close to her belly, and as one of the cubs stirred, she reached out and nudged it back to the warmth of her fur.

Leafpool felt a strange sensation of joy swell inside her. *I know how this fox feels. Even asleep, she is still their mother. Soon I will have babies of my own to guard with my life, to love with every beat of my heart.* With one more look at the she-fox, this time with a mix of admiration and envy, Leafpool turned and tiptoed back to her sister.

"Leafpool, wake up! It's light outside. We should leave before the fox scents us." Squirreflight prodded Leafpool with her paw.

Leafpool rolled over and opened her eyes. Her kits had settled at last and she had gone to sleep dreaming of gentle foxes and milk-scented dens. She stood up, and gasped as her belly swung below her.

Squirreflight jumped to her side. "What's wrong?"

Leafpool found her balance and took a deep breath. "I think the kits will come today," she mewed.

She waited for her sister to panic, but instead Squirreflight looked calm and determined. "Okay. Well, you can't have them here! We need to get you as far from this fox hole as possible

and find some shelter.” She helped Leafpool up the sandy tunnel and into the cold, clear air. It had stopped raining, and the forest was quiet save for dripping leaves.

Leafpool could hear Squirrelflight’s belly rumbling with hunger but she was relieved when her sister didn’t suggest stopping to hunt. Leafpool didn’t think she could eat a mouthful. She just wanted to find a safe place to have her babies. Squirrelflight sniffed at a clump of ferns and stuck her head inside.

“It looks dry in here,” she called, her voice muffled.

“Not if it rains again,” Leafpool replied. She staggered on, almost falling when a bramble snagged her fur.

“What about underneath this thicket?” Squirrelflight suggested as she helped Leafpool free from the prickly tendril.

“Do you want my kits to be full of thorns?” Leafpool meowed.

Squirrelflight said nothing, just walked on. “How about next to that fallen tree?” She pointed with her tail to an oak that lay on its side.

Leafpool wrinkled her nose. “It smells bad.” She could tell Squirrelflight was about to explode. Then she stumbled to a halt as a spasm of pain gripped her belly. “Oh! I think they’re coming!”

In an instant Squirrelflight was pressed against her. “Not yet, Leafpool! We have to find somewhere safe for them.”

Leafpool looked up and saw a gnarled tree in front of them, so old and twisted that she couldn’t tell if it had been an oak or an elm to begin with. It was smothered in ivy, and a dark shadow that ran down its length showed that it had been hollowed out by a blast of lightning many moons ago. She felt a pull toward it as if it had reached out and grabbed the scruff of her neck.

“That is the place,” she whispered as another wave of agony rippled through her. “That is where my kits will be born.”



CHAPTER 9



Leafpool dragged herself into the hollow tree and collapsed onto the leaf mulch with a groan. She was dimly aware of Squirrelflight fluttering around her, shoving more dried leaves beneath her and placing a bundle of dripping moss near her head. Leafpool felt as if the whole world had shrunk to the dimensions of her body, a world that was full of scarlet pain and throbbing fear. There was a pulling sensation underneath her tail and Leafpool cried out in alarm.

“Tell me what I should do!” Squirrelflight hissed in Leafpool’s ear. “I can see a kit coming!”

Leafpool gritted her teeth against the next pulse of agony. “Wait until it is free, then nip open the sac around its body. Push it toward me so I can lick it.” She yelped at a wave of sharp stabbing pain across her belly. She lifted her head and saw a small, slime-covered black shape slither out onto the leaves. Squirrelflight tugged away the transparent sac that covered its head and Leafpool stiffened as a wail pierced the air.

Squirrelflight nudged the kit closer to Leafpool’s belly and Leafpool curled herself around it. Her world expanded just enough to enclose this beautiful, perfect kit. She started to lick its fur clean as she felt its tiny mouth latch onto her. Then she writhed as another spasm racked her body, stronger than any before. She waited for the wave of pain to die away as the kit shifted inside her, but the throbbing continued. In the red mist of agony, Leafpool felt herself begin to panic.

Something’s wrong!

"I can see another kit!" Squirrelflight called. "But it's not moving! Push harder!"

Leafpool had no breath to speak. She tried to press her paws against her belly, manipulate the kit the way she would if she were helping a queen in the nursery. But her legs flopped weakly to the ground. She felt Squirrelflight trying to help, prodding and nudging with her own paws, but she hadn't been trained, and Leafpool had no strength to tell her sister what to do. Dark shadows clustered around her and she felt herself ebbing away. She knew that cats could die if a kit got stuck. *Help me, StarClan . . .*

Then the air stirred beside her, and a new, familiar scent filled the hollow tree. Leafpool felt strong paws pressing down on her flanks, and the kit inside her started to turn. She opened her eyes and saw the faint outline of a starlit cat, gray-furred and flat-muzzled. *Yellowfang!*

Squirrelflight was standing beside Leafpool, huge-eyed and gaping.

"Make yourself useful," Yellowfang ordered, and her voice sounded like the wind between the stars. "Give Leafpool some water, and rub some warmth into that black kit."

Squirrelflight rolled the moss closer to Leafpool so she could drink, then started pummeling the tiny shape beside her belly until the little cat squeaked. Leafpool felt Yellowfang shove a stick between her teeth.

"This is going to hurt," the old cat grunted. She leaned on Leafpool's belly with a force that made her shriek in protest. "Have a little faith," Yellowfang hissed.

With a wrench, the kit was born, a huge golden tabby tom with broad shoulders and a deafening yowl. Squirrelflight dragged him beside the black kit and Leafpool stared down at the tom in disbelief. *My son!* She felt him start to suckle and let her head fall onto the leaves. She had never been so exhausted in her life. She felt as if she had been turned inside out, and wanted nothing more than to sleep for a moon.

But Yellowfang shook her roughly awake. "Stay with us, Leafpool," she rasped. "There's one more kit to be born."

"I can't," Leafpool whimpered without opening her eyes. "I'm not strong enough."

"You have to be," Squirrelflight told her, her amber eyes

fierce in the darkness. "Come on!" She propped Leafpool's head against her shoulder and held her close as yet another spasm rolled through Leafpool's body. This time the kit slipped out easily, a pale gray tabby even smaller than its littermates.

"Another tom," Yellowfang announced, efficiently peeling off the sac and delivering the mewling bundle to Leafpool's belly. "Two sons and a daughter. Congratulations, Leafpool." There was warmth in her voice, and Leafpool caught a spark of emotion glistening in the old cat's eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered. She bent over her babies and started licking the stickiness from their fur.

Above her, she heard Yellowfang telling Squirrelflight that they both needed to get some rest, then Squirrelflight could fetch prey and more water. "Wait for the kits' eyes to open before you go back to the hollow," she mewed. There was a pause. "If you go back."

As she slipped into the stillness of sleep, Leafpool thought she might stay in this hollow tree forever. *Everything that matters to me in the world is here.*

She woke to a strong, meaty scent under her nose. Blinking open her eyes, she saw Squirrelflight pushing a shrew toward her. "You haven't eaten for two sunrises," her sister meowed. "Come on, share this with me."

Leafpool half sat up, aware of an empty feeling in her belly. She looked down and saw her three kits curled tightly against her, fast asleep. Her heart swelled with love, more fierce than anything she had felt before. *I would die for you*, she thought. The hollow was cold and there was a strange white light filtering through the narrow entrance. Leafpool craned her neck and saw thick flakes drifting down from the sky to settle on the forest floor.

"It's snowing!" Squirrelflight mewed. "It'll make hunting more difficult, but at least it will hide our scent." She watched Leafpool tuck into the shrew. The black she-kit wriggled free from her brothers and wailed when she felt cold air on her pelt. At once Leafpool stopped eating and tucked her daughter gently back into her belly fur.

"See?" Squirrelflight purred. "You know exactly what to do! I knew you'd be a brilliant mother."

There was a ring of sadness in her voice, and Leafpool recalled Yellowfang's prophecy that Squirrelflight would never have kits of her own. She felt a stab of guilt that she had ever doubted these kits should be born. They were a blessing, like Brackenfur had said. *Thank you, StarClan*, she whispered.

Squirrelflight curled her body around Leafpool's, blocking out the draft from the entrance. Leafpool felt her sister's breath warm on the back of her neck as they drifted into sleep. A slight shift in the air made Leafpool open her eyes. Outside the forest was still and silent under its pelt of snow. She could hear the tiny breathing sounds of her kits, muffled against her belly, and steady snores from Squirrelflight. And something else . . .

A glittering outline appeared in a shaft of starlight. Warm eyes glowed from the shadows, and Leafpool detected a faint, half-remembered scent. Not Yellowfang this time. *Feathertail!*

The pale silver she-cat stepped forward and looked down at the kits. Her purrs rumbled against the hollow tree, and Squirrelflight stirred. Leafpool felt her sister stiffen in surprise.

"Feathertail!" she gasped. She scrambled to her paws and tried to press herself against the starlit shape, her tail curled over her back in delight. "I never thought I'd see you here! Have you come to see Leafpool's kits? Aren't they amazing?" Squirrelflight broke away and leaned down over Leafpool. Very gently, she moved the kits into view one by one. "A black she-cat and two toms, this golden tabby and this gray. I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life." Her voice cracked.

Feathertail's blue eyes brimmed with love. "They are perfect. Crowfeather would be so proud."

With a jolt, Leafpool remembered that Feathertail had been Crowfeather's mate first. Had she come all the way from the Tribe of Endless Hunting to tell Leafpool that Crowfeather deserved to know he had become a father? As if she could tell what Leafpool was thinking, Feathertail shook her head.

"These kits are more precious than you could possibly know," she mewed softly. "Cats will speak of them for many seasons to come. They must stay in ThunderClan, for all the Clans' sakes, with a mother and father who can be proud of them, who can share them with their Clanmates to be raised as strong, loyal warriors."

Leafpool opened her mouth to protest that this was

impossible, her Clanmates would never accept Crowfeather as their father, and might reject her too, knowing that their medicine cat had destroyed the code. But Feathertail was looking at Squirrelflight.

"I know how much Leafpool loves these kits," she murmured. "But you must be their mother and raise them in ThunderClan with your head held high."

Squirrelflight stared at the starlit she-cat. "How can you do this?" she whispered. "You are asking me to lie to every cat I love."

Feathertail ran her paw very lightly over the backs of the sleeping kits. "Because I love these kits as much as you do. They are Crowfeather's: How could I not? I want them to have the best life, not one lived outside the Clans, in shame and exile."

"Do you wish they were yours?" Squirrelflight whispered.

The silver cat blinked without looking up. "That was never meant to be. The destiny of these kits begins now, and you have the power to change everything, Squirrelflight. Please believe me when I say that Leafpool's kits *must* stay in ThunderClan."

She began to fade until the bark of the hollow tree could be seen behind her. Squirrelflight gazed at Leafpool, and the medicine cat saw water glistening in her sister's eyes. "Feathertail was right," Squirrelflight whispered. "I do love these kits, and I want them to have the best life they can—whatever lies ahead for them." She took a deep breath. "I will raise them as mine and Brambleclaw's, as true cats of ThunderClan."

Leafpool closed her eyes. *It is the best for my babies*, she told herself. "Thank you," she murmured.

At that moment the golden tabby wriggled and started mewling. Leafpool nudged him toward her belly but he didn't seem interested in feeding; he just wanted to test his voice. His sister burrowed deeper into Leafpool's fur with a squeak, while the pale gray tom raised his head, eyes still tightly shut, as if he was trying to figure out where the noise was coming from.

"I need to give them names," Leafpool purred, marveling at the way these tiny cats already seemed so different, so strong and full of life. She studied the golden tom. His neck was ringed with thick fluff, and his mouth opened wide to reveal thorn-prick white teeth. "He looks like a lion!" she commented. "I

think I'll call him Lionkit."

Squirrelflight nodded. "The she-cat is as dark as holly bark. Maybe Hollykit for her?"

Leafpool hesitated. *My daughter is the image of Crowfeather. Shouldn't she be named after her father, even if he never knows the truth?*

Her sister was watching her closely. "Leafpool," she mewed, as gently as the snow falling outside. "I am going to raise these kits as my own. Surely I should have a say in their names?"

Leafpool felt a pain inside her belly that was sharper than birth pangs. *My precious kits!* A few snowflakes drifted down through the hollow tree and settled on Lionkit's fur. Leafpool battled the urge to cover the kits with her body, protect them from snow, rain, hail, badgers, foxes, anything that might harm one hair on their pelts. Then the scent of Feathertail drifted around her, and she knew their path had already been chosen. Whatever she felt, however many regrets the future held, the only thing that mattered was creating the best life for these three perfect babies.

Squirrelflight pressed her muzzle against Leafpool's shoulder. "ThunderClan needs you to be their medicine cat," she mewed. "I will love these kits as if they were my own. I already do! I will never take them from the Clan, you will see them all the time, and they will know you are my kin so they will always be close to you. Remember what Feathertail said: These kits deserve parents who can be proud of them, who can raise them among their Clanmates as fine warriors. Brambleclaw and I can do that. And the secret of their birth will die with me, I promise."

But I am their mother! Leafpool wailed silently. In her heart, she knew Squirrelflight was right. She could not raise these kits, their mother a medicine cat, their father a WindClan warrior who seemed to have found a new mate already.

"Hollykit is a good name," she mewed numbly.



CHAPTER 10



Sunrises rolled past in a snow-bright haze. The kits grew faster than Leafpool thought possible, and almost overnight the hollow tree seemed too small to contain them. After five days, she and Squirrelflight ushered the little cats outside. They stumbled into the thick snow on tiny legs with their tails stuck straight out behind them. Lionkit and Hollykit had already opened their eyes—amber and green, reminding Leafpool of newleaf and warmth and the certainty that the snow would not stay forever.

The smallest kit was still unnamed and his eyes were tight shut. As Leafpool went to fish him out of a snowdrift, he blinked and Leafpool was dazzled by a flash of brilliant blue. “Like a jay’s wing!” she gasped.

Squirrelflight bounded over, snow clinging to her belly fur, and looked down at the tom. “Then we should call him Jaykit, don’t you think?”

Leafpool nodded. *And one day you will be Jayfeather, like your father.*

Jaykit ran in a circle and blundered straight back into the snowdrift. Squirrelflight hooked him out with an amused purr. “You can watch where you’re going now that your eyes are open!” she teased.

Lionkit squeaked and Jaykit tottered in the direction of the sound. Leafpool looked around for her daughter. She was wrestling with a leaf, biting it with her tiny teeth and clawing at the edges. “Come on, fierce little warrior,” Leafpool called. “Back to the nest to warm up!”

The kits only stayed still long enough for Leafpool to lick their fur clean before they tumbled out of the nest and started exploring the inside of the tree. Lionkit found the dry clump of moss that Leafpool had drunk from during the birth, and he started rolling it around with angry little growls in his throat. Hollykit watched for a moment, her head on one side, before running over to join him. Bits of moss flew up as they tussled with their prey.

Leafpool noticed Jaykit marching across the den. Suddenly he slipped on a wet leaf and bumped his nose against the bark wall. Leafpool was ready to comfort him, but the little cat shook his head, then changed direction and headed for the moss game instead. Hollykit stopped playing and sat back to let him have a turn shredding the ball. There wasn't much left but a few scraps once Lionkit had finished shaking it in his teeth. Leafpool felt a rush of love for her brave, strong son and her gentle, thoughtful daughter. But there was a special place in her heart for her smallest kit, who seemed oddly vulnerable compared with his littermates.

Half a moon passed. The snow began to thaw and the she-cats basked in an unexpected and welcome patch of sunshine outside the hollow tree. In front of them, Lionkit, Hollykit, and Jaykit were pushing fronds of dead bracken into a pile, then leaping off a grassy tussock into the middle.

"I can jump the highest! Watch me!" mewed Lionkit. He sprang into the air with his sturdy forelegs outstretched and plunged into the ferns.

"And me!" squeaked Jaykit. He leaped off the tussock and there was a muffled yelp as he landed squarely on his brother, who was still wriggling free.

"Jaykit, look out!" Hollykit piped. She was purring with amusement. "You're so silly!"

The little toms scrambled out of the bracken with their fur full of spiky brown prickles.

"I think we've just seen some flying hedgehogs," joked Squirrelflight. "Come here, you two. Let's clean you up."

Lionkit ignored her. "That was fun! Let's do it again!" He scampered back to the tussock.

"Wait for me!" Jaykit chirped.

Leafpool shook her head. "They have so much energy!" she exclaimed.

"They're growing fast," Squirrelflight agreed. There was a pause, and it seemed to Leafpool as if the whole forest was waiting. "You know we should take them back," Squirrelflight mewed.

Leafpool closed her eyes. "I wish we didn't have to," she whispered. "They're so happy here."

"I know. But we don't have a choice. If we stay here any longer, the kits might remember too much . . ."

Leafpool stared at her kits as if she would never see them again. *Will they remember this time?* she wondered. *Will there always be some part of them that knows the truth?* She knew that Squirrelflight would love them, but what about Brambleclaw? And through Brambleclaw, Tigerstar? *Does he know that these kits have been born?* Leafpool stared at Lionkit in alarm. *Will Tigerstar lure him to the Dark Forest as well?*

Suddenly there was a wail, and Leafpool realized Jaykit had vanished. Lionkit and Hollykit were standing on top of the tussock with their backs to the she-cats, looking down.

"Jaykit fell in a hole!" Lionkit called. "I think he's stuck."

"Jaykit's a mouse-brain!" mewed Hollykit.

"Hush," Leafpool chided, bounding over to take a look. The little gray tom had vanished into the gap where a sapling had stood before being wrenched out of the soil by a storm. Only the tips of his ears were visible against the brown earth.

"Help!" he wailed.

Leafpool braced her hindpaws in the loose soil and leaned down into the hole. "Wriggle this way, Jaykit," she panted. She felt his feather-soft fur brush against her muzzle, and reached down to grip his scruff in her teeth. With a heave, she dragged herself backward and hauled him out of the hole.

Jaykit crouched down and shook himself, sending earth flying. He gazed up at Leafpool with eyes as clear as the sky. "Thank you for rescuing me!" he chirped. "That was a really big adventure, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was," purred Leafpool. She looked into her son's eyes. They were so beautiful, and yet . . .

She looked over her shoulder. "There's a big leaf over there, Jaykit," she mewed. "Please could you fetch it for me so I can

wipe the mud off my fur?"

"I'll get it!" Hollykit offered, jumping down from the tussock.

"It's okay, Jaykit can manage," Leafpool meowed. She watched as her son trotted away from her. He paused when his paws crunched onto the edge of a dead leaf.

"Is this the one?" he called.

"Find the biggest leaf you can, please!" Leafpool told him.

Jaykit lowered his muzzle and brushed his whiskers over the leaf under his paws. He moved sideways and did the same to the next leaf. With a satisfied grunt, he picked up the second leaf and carried it back to Leafpool, almost tripping over the bottom edge.

"Thank you, little one," Leafpool praised him. "That will get me very clean." She watched him trot back to his littermates.

"What was all that about?" Squirrelflight asked. "Are you getting him ready for apprentice duties?"

Leafpool shook her head. "He didn't choose the biggest leaf," she murmured. "And did you see the way he only stopped when he was standing on them, and how he measured the size of the leaves with his whiskers?"

Squirrelflight looked curiously at her. "Am I missing something?"

Leafpool took a deep breath. "I think Jaykit is blind."

"Blind? Are you sure?"

Leafpool nodded. Squirrelflight stared at the gray kit as he bundled against Lionkit, growling like the tiniest badger. Lionkit turned and batted him very gently with his paw.

"Poor little thing," Squirrelflight murmured. "What sort of life will he have?"

"The same as his littermates, of course," Leafpool snapped.

Squirrelflight's eyes were troubled. "But blind cats can't be warriors! Longtail had to join the elders' den as soon as he lost his sight. What place is there in a Clan for a cat who cannot see?"

"There is an equal place for Jaykit as any of these kits!" Leafpool hissed. "I will make sure of it, even if you won't. Look at him! He doesn't know there is anything different about him!"

The she-cats watched the three kits tumbling on the damp grass. When Jaykit rolled too close to a patch of brambles, Hollykit nudged him away from the thorns, then pounced on his

tail with a squeal.

“His littermates already know how to look after him,” Leafpool pointed out. Her heart ached. *Be brave, my little son. I will always walk beside you, I promise.*



CHAPTER 11



They left the hollow tree at the next sunrise. It was cold and calm, but drifts of snow still lay under the trees in the densest parts of the woods. The kits started out full of enthusiasm, but quickly became tired when their stumpy legs sank into the snow and their fur grew clogged and heavy. Leafpool felt exhausted too, uncomfortably full of milk and with a stabbing ache deep in her belly. Squirrelflight darted from one to the other, hoisting the kits out of clumps of snow and nudging Jaykit when he sat down and refused to move.

At sunhigh Leafpool found a sheltered patch of ferns and ordered the kits to rest. Squirrelflight darted into the undergrowth to look for prey. Hollykit and Jaykit snuggled into Leafpool's belly for warmth and milk but Lionkit sat bolt upright, his sun-colored eyes curious.

"Where are we going?" he mewed.

"To the place where ThunderClan lives," Leafpool told him. "In a big hollow full of warm dens and places for you to play. There will be lots of other cats there, and a big lake to cool your paws when it gets hot."

For a moment Lionkit looked doubtful. "But I liked living in the hollow tree."

"I know you did. But you're getting too big to stay there forever! You are a ThunderClan cat, Lionkit, and you need to join your Clanmates."

"Will they like me?"

"They will love you," Leafpool purred.

Squirrelflight returned with a rather scrawny vole, which she shared with Leafpool. When they had crunched the last of the bones, Leafpool gently untangled her kits from her fur. "Come on, little ones. Time to go."

"I don't want to walk anymore," Jaykit wailed. "My paws hurt!"

"Climb onto my shoulders," Squirrelflight meowed, crouching down so he could scramble on. "I'll carry you for a while."

"That's not fair!" grumbled Hollykit. "Just because Jaykit can't see, it doesn't mean his legs don't work!"

"But his legs are much shorter than ours," Lionkit pointed out, looking down at his fluffy forepaws. "We can manage better than he can in the snow. Race you to that tree, Hollykit!"

Leafpool watched her son and daughter scamper ahead, throwing up specks of snow from their tiny paws. *They are so close already, my three beautiful kits. As long as they have one another, they can survive anything.*

They followed the steep-banked stream until they could see the open stretch of grass leading down to the lake, then turned and headed along the ridge above the ThunderClan boundary. The snow had melted here and all three kits trotted along, sniffing the new scents.

"We'll have to cross the border soon," Squirrelflight mewed.

Leafpool nodded. She felt sick with dread. One small paw step would change everything, plunge her back into her life as a medicine cat, when she had barely become a mother. She slowed down, her paws as heavy as rocks, and Squirrelflight kept pace with her, resting her tail lightly on Leafpool's back.

Lionkit had scrambled onto a fallen tree. "I can see the lake from here!" he yowled. "It's as big as the world!"

"Let me see!" panted Hollykit, trying to haul herself up. Her scrabbling paws knocked Lionkit off balance and he fell off the trunk with a yelp.

Leafpool was about to run over to him when she stopped. She looked at Squirrelflight. "You go," she mewed. "They need to learn that you are their mother." The words stuck like thorns in her throat and the trees blurred around her.

Squirrelflight's gaze was warm and full of sorrow. "Are you

sure?" she asked quietly. "I know what we agreed, but you can still change your mind. I will do everything I can to help you, whatever you decide."

Leafpool leaned against her sister's shoulder for a moment. *I wish everything were different! Oh, my kits, I am so sorry!* Then she straightened up. "I am sure. Be good to them. Love them more than life."

"I will," Squirrelflight promised.

Leafpool rubbed some of her milk scent onto Squirrelflight's fur, then watched as her sister trotted over to the tree trunk to rescue Lionkit, who was unharmed but squeaking indignantly on the other side. As Squirrelflight pulled Lionkit clear of the ferns, Jaykit and Hollykit clustered around her.

"Can you help us all climb up?" they mewed. "We want to see the lake!"

Squirrelflight curled her tail around them. "Of course I can, my darlings," she purred. "One at a time, no pushing!"

Leafpool forced herself to turn away and walk into the undergrowth. She needed to find some herbs that would stop her milk. There was a patch of wild parsley growing close to the border. Nosing carefully through the bracken, she found the frost-nipped plants and picked the leaves. Some she ate at once, wincing at the sharp taste, and the rest she rolled up to carry back to her den. *I am the ThunderClan medicine cat, she told herself. My sister has had three kits, and I could not be more delighted.*

They crossed the border close to one of the tunnel entrances and began to descend the slope toward the hollow. Hollykit stopped by the tunnel and peered in, her fur flattened by the cold wind.

"Stay away from there!" Squirrelflight warned. "It's not safe for cats to go inside."

Lionkit scrunched up his nose. "Who'd want to? It's all dark and scary!"

Jaykit was sniffing a clump of moss. "I can smell cats!" he squeaked.

"That's right, little one," Squirrelflight mewed. "Those are your Clanmates."

Hollykit trotted over and butted Squirrelflight's belly. "I'm hungry! Where's all the milk gone? You smell the same, but I

can't find anything to eat!"

Leafpool watched as Squirrelflight stroked Hollykit with her tail. "I'm sorry, poppet. My milk has gone, but there's a lovely cat called Daisy who will have plenty for you."

Hollykit pouted. "But I want your milk!"

Leafpool's belly ached with a pain more fierce than the birth of her kits. She hung back as Squirrelflight led them down the narrow path beside the hollow. She couldn't risk the kits picking up the milk-scent that still clung to her. When she noticed a deep patch of snow among the roots of a tree, she stopped and rolled in it to clean off the last traces of kit scent. Then she rubbed herself against a patch of damp ferns, covering her fur in sharp green flavors as further disguise.

In the distance, she could hear Squirrelflight telling the kits about ThunderClan, how they would grow up to be great warriors, strong and skilled at hunting and fighting.

"I know how to fight already!" Lionkit boasted. "Watch this!" He launched himself at a branch that lay on the fallen leaves, then stumbled back as a twig poked him in the eye. "Ow!"

"Come on, little warrior," Squirrelflight meowed. "Let's see if we can get you home in one piece!"

"Why aren't you walking with us anymore?" piped a small voice beside Leafpool.

She jumped and looked down at Jaykit's dazzling blue eyes. "I . . . I had to fetch some herbs," she explained after putting the leaf wrap on the ground. "I'm the medicine cat for ThunderClan, you see."

Jaykit put his head on one side. "You were in the hollow tree, weren't you?"

"That's right. I am your mother's sister. I came to look after her while she gave birth to you."

"Why didn't she stay in the Clan to have us?" Jaykit asked.

Leafpool's heart began to beat faster. "Because we had to go on a journey together," she meowed. "And you came unexpectedly. But it's my duty to care for all of our Clanmates when they are sick or in trouble, so it's lucky I was there to look after your mother."

Jaykit blinked his beautiful eyes. "Does that mean you can make me see?" he mewed. "Hollykit and Lionkit can see things,

I know. And I guess you and my mother can. Why not me?"

Leafpool felt her heart crack. "I don't know," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I can't make you see. I would if I could, I promise."

Jaykit shrugged his tiny shoulders. "Okay," he chirped. He spun around and scampered down the slope, following exactly in the paw steps of his littermates. He grabbed at Hollykit's tail as he passed, and she squealed.

The barrier of thorns loomed up in front of them. Squirrelflight hesitated, and Leafpool saw her take a deep breath. She knew she was asking so much of her sister, not least that she spend the rest of her life lying to the cat she had so recently chosen to be her mate. *I know these kits are worth it! Remember what Feathertail said, that their destiny will shape the future of all the Clans.*

Squirrelflight looked down at the little cats beside her. "Are you ready to meet your Clanmates?" she asked. "And your father?"

Three small heads nodded vigorously.

"When can I start being a warrior?" Lionkit squeaked.

Squirrelflight licked his head. "Soon enough," she promised. She looked over her shoulder at Leafpool. "This is it," she murmured.

"Thank you," Leafpool whispered.

Squirrelflight led her kits into the thorns, holding the prickly tendrils aside with her body. Lionkit and Hollykit walked either side of Jaykit to guide him through. The branches stirred around them, swallowing them up. There was a moment of silence as they emerged into the clearing, then Leafpool heard a chorus of voices.

"Squirrelflight! You're back!"

"With kits? I didn't even know you were expecting!"

"Thank StarClan Leafpool was with you! Are you all well? They look fine!"

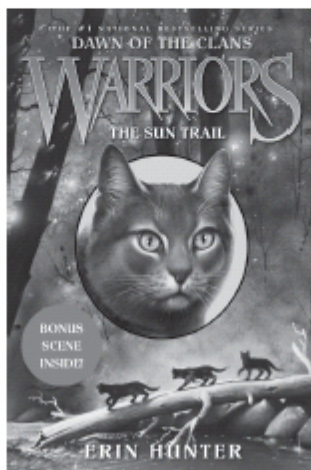
"Brambleclaw, look! You're a father!"

Leafpool stood outside the barrier of thorns and closed her eyes. Three tiny shapes filled her mind, three pairs of eyes—amber, green and blue—glowed from the shadows.

Live well, my darlings. You will always be in my heart.

Excerpt from *Warriors: Dawn of the Clans #1: The Sun Trail*

KEEP READING FOR A PEEK AT
DAWN OF THE CLANS
WARRIORS
BOOK 1:
THE SUN TRAIL



A mysterious vision leads a group of cats away from their mountain home in search of a land filled with prey and shelter. But the challenges they face threaten to divide them, and the young cats must try to figure out how to live side by side in peace.



PROLOGUE



Cold gray light rippled over the floor of a cave so vast that its roof was lost in shadows. An endless screen of water fell across the entrance, its sound echoing from the rocks.

Near the back of the cavern crouched a frail white she-cat. Despite her age, her green eyes were still clear and deep with wisdom as they traveled over the skinny cats swarming the cave floor, restlessly pacing in front of the shimmering waterfall; the elders huddled together in the sleeping hollows; the kits mewling desperately, demanding food from their exhausted mothers.

"We can't go on like this," the old she-cat whispered to herself.

A few tail-lengths away, several kits squabbled over an eagle carcass, its flesh stripped away the day before as soon as their mothers had caught it. A big ginger kit shouldered a smaller tabby away from the bone she was gnawing.

"I *need* this!" he announced.

The tabby sprang up and nipped the end of the ginger kit's tail. "We *all* need it, flea-brain!" she snapped as the ginger tom let out a yowl.

A gray-and-white elder, every one of her ribs showing through her pelt, tottered up to the kits and snatched the bone away.

"Hey!" the ginger kit protested.

The elder glared at him. "I caught prey for season after season," she snarled. "Don't you think I deserve one measly

bone?" She turned and stalked away, the bone clamped firmly in her jaws.

The ginger kit stared after her for a heartbeat, then scampered away, wailing, to his mother, who lay on a rock beside the cave wall. Instead of comforting him, his mother snapped something, angrily flicking her tail.

The old white she-cat was too far away to hear what the mother cat said, but she sighed.

Every cat is coming to the end of what they can bear, she thought.

She watched as the gray-and-white elder padded across the cave and dropped the eagle bone in front of an even older she-cat, who was crouching in a sleeping hollow with her nose resting on her front paws. Her dull gaze was fixed on the far wall of the cave.

"Here, Misty Water." The gray-and-white elder nudged the bone closer to her with one paw. "Eat. It's not much, but it might help."

Misty Water's indifferent gaze flickered over her friend and away again. "No, thanks, Silver Frost. I have no appetite, not since Broken Feather died." Her voice throbbed with grief. "He would have lived, if there had been enough prey for him to eat." She sighed. "Now I'm just waiting to join him."

"Misty Water, you can't—"

The white she-cat was distracted from the elders' talk as a group of cats appeared at the entrance to the cave, shaking snow off their fur. Several other cats sprang up and ran to meet them.

"Did you catch anything?" one of them called out eagerly.

"Yes, where's your prey?" another demanded.

The leader of the newcomers shook his head sadly. "Sorry. There wasn't enough to bring back."

Hope melted away from the cats in the cave like mist under strong sunlight. They glanced at one another, then trailed away, their heads drooping and their tails brushing the ground.

The white she-cat watched them, then turned her head as she realized that a cat was padding up to her. Though his muzzle was gray with age and his golden tabby fur thin and patchy, he walked with a confidence that showed he had once been a strong and noble cat.

“Half Moon,” he greeted the white she-cat, settling down beside her and wrapping his tail over his paws.

The white she-cat let out a faint *mrrow* of amusement. “You shouldn’t call me that, Lion’s Roar,” she protested. “I’ve been the Teller of Pointed Stones for many seasons.”

The golden tabby tom sniffed. “I don’t care how long the others have called you Stoneteller. You’ll always be Half Moon to me.”

Half Moon made no response, except to reach out her tail and rest it on her old friend’s shoulder.

“I was born in this cave,” Lion’s Roar went on. “But my mother, Shy Fawn, told me about the time before we came here—when you lived beside a lake, sheltered beneath trees.”

Half Moon sighed faintly. “I am the only cat left who remembers the lake, and the journey we made to come here. But I have lived three times as many moons here in the mountains than I did beside the lake, and the endless rushing of the waterfall now echoes in my heart.” She paused, blinking again, then asked, “Why are you telling me this now?”

Lion’s Roar hesitated before replying. “Hunger might kill us all before the sun shines again, and there’s no more room in the cave.” He stretched out one paw and brushed Half Moon’s shoulder fur. “Something must be done.”

Half Moon’s eyes stretched wide as she gazed at him. “But we can’t leave the mountains!” she protested, her voice breathless with shock. “Jay’s Wing promised; he made me the Teller of the Pointed Stones because this was our destined home.”

Lion’s Roar met her intense green gaze. “Are you sure Jay’s Wing was right?” he asked. “How could he know what was going to happen in the future?”

“He had to be right,” Half Moon murmured.

Her mind flew back to the ceremony, so many seasons before, when Jay’s Wing had made her the Teller of the Pointed Stones. She shivered as she heard his voice again, full of love for her and grief that her destiny meant they could never be together. “Others will come after you, moon upon moon. Choose them well, train them well—trust the future of your Tribe to them.”

He would never have said that if he didn’t mean for us to stay

here.

Half Moon let her gaze drift over the other cats: her cats, now thin and hungry. She shook her head sadly. Lion's Roar was right: something had to be done if they were to survive.

Gradually she realized that the cold gray light in the cave was brightening to a warm gold, as if the sun was rising beyond the screen of falling water—but Half Moon knew that night was falling.

At her side Lion's Roar sat calmly washing his ears, while the other cats in the cave took no notice of the deepening golden blaze.

No cat sees it but me! What can it mean?

Bathed in the brilliant light, Half Moon remembered how, when she first became Healer, Jay's Wing had told her that her ancestors would guide her in the decisions she must make—that, sometimes, she would see strange things that meant more than they first appeared. She had never been directly aware of her ancestors, but she had learned to look out for the signs.

Possible meanings rushed through Half Moon's mind, thick as snowflakes in a blizzard. *Maybe the warm weather is going to come early. But how would that help, when there are so many of us?* Then she wondered whether the sun was really shining somewhere else, where there was warmth and prey and shelter. *But how would that help us, up here in the mountains?*

The sunlight grew stronger and stronger, until Half Moon could barely stand to look into the rays. She relaxed as a new idea rose in her mind.

Maybe Lion's Roar is right, and only some of us belong here. Maybe some of us should travel toward the place where the sun rises, to make a new home in the brightest light of all? Somewhere they will be safe, and well fed, with room to nurture generations of kits?

As Half Moon basked in the warmth of sunlight on her fur, she found the certainty she needed within herself. Some of her cats would remain, a small enough group for the mountains to sustain, and the rest of her Tribe would journey toward the rising sun, to find a new home.

But I won't leave the cave, she thought. I will see out the twilight of my days here, a whole lifetime away from where I was born. And then maybe . . . just maybe . . . I'll find Jay's Wing again.



CHAPTER 1



Gray Wing toiled up the snow-covered slope toward a ridge that bit into the sky like a row of snaggly teeth. He set each paw down carefully, to avoid breaking through the frozen surface and sinking into the powdery drifts underneath. Light flakes were falling, dappling his dark gray pelt. He was so cold that he couldn't feel his pads anymore, and his belly yowled with hunger.

I can't remember the last time I felt warm or full-fed.

In the last sunny season he had still been a kit, playing with his littermate, Clear Sky, around the edge of the pool outside the cave. Now that seemed like a lifetime ago. Gray Wing had only the vaguest memories of green leaves on the stubby mountain trees, and the sunshine bathing the rocks.

Pausing to taste the air for prey, he gazed across the snowbound mountains, peak after peak stretching away into the distance. The heavy gray sky overhead promised yet more snow to come.

But the air carried no scent of his quarry, and Gray Wing plodded on. Clear Sky appeared from behind an outcrop of rock, his pale gray fur barely visible against the snow. His jaws were empty, and as he spotted Gray Wing he shook his head.

"Not a sniff of prey anywhere!" he called. "Why don't we—"

A raucous cry from above cut off his words. A shadow flashed over Gray Wing. Looking up, he saw a hawk swoop low across the slope, its talons hooked and cruel.

As the hawk passed, Clear Sky leaped high into the air, his

forepaws outstretched. His claws snagged the bird's feathers and he fell back, dragging it from the sky. It let out another harsh cry as it landed on the snow in a flurry of beating wings.

Gray Wing charged up the slope, his paws throwing up a fine spray of snow. Reaching his brother, he planted both forepaws on one thrashing wing. The hawk glared up at him with hatred in its yellow eyes, and Gray Wing had to duck to avoid its slashing talons.

Clear Sky thrust his head forward and sank his teeth into the hawk's neck. It jerked once and went limp, its gaze growing instantly dull as blood seeped from its wound and stained the snow.

Panting, Gray Wing looked at his brother. "That was a great catch!" he exclaimed, warm triumph flooding through him.

Clear Sky shook his head. "But look how scrawny it is. There's nothing in these mountains fit to eat, and won't be until the snow clears."

He crouched beside his prey, ready to take the first bite. Gray Wing settled next to him, his jaws flooding as he thought of sinking his teeth into the hawk.

But then he remembered the starving cats back in the cave, squabbling over scraps. "We should take this prey back to the others," he meowed. "They need it to give them strength for their hunting."

"We need strength too," Clear Sky mumbled, tearing away a mouthful of the hawk's flesh.

"We'll be fine." Gray Wing gave him a prod in the side. "We're the best hunters in the Tribe. Nothing escapes us when we hunt together. We can catch something else, easier than the others can."

Clear Sky rolled his eyes as he swallowed the prey. "Why must you always be so unselfish?" he grumbled. "Okay, let's go."

Together the two cats dragged the hawk down the slope and over the boulders at the bottom of a narrow gully until they reached the pool where the waterfall roared down. Though it wasn't heavy, the bird was awkward to manage. Its flopping wings and claws caught on every hidden rock and buried thornbush.

"We wouldn't have to do this if you'd let us eat it," Clear Sky

muttered as he struggled to maneuver the hawk along the path that led behind the waterfall. "I hope the others appreciate this."

Clear Sky grumbles, Gray Wing thought, but he knows this is the right thing to do.

Yowls of surprise greeted the brothers when they returned to the cave. Several cats ran to meet them, gathering around to gaze wide-eyed at the prey.

"It's *huge*!" Turtle Tail exclaimed, her green eyes shining as she bounded up to Gray Wing. "I can't believe you brought it back for us."

Gray Wing dipped his head, feeling slightly embarrassed at her enthusiasm. "It won't feed every cat," he mewed.

Shattered Ice, a gray-and-white tom, shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. "Which cats are going out to hunt?" he asked. "They should be the first ones to eat."

Murmurs came from among the assembled cats, broken by a shrill wail:

"But I'm *hungry*! Why can't I have some? I could go out and hunt."

Gray Wing recognized the voice as being his younger brother, Jagged Peak's. Their mother, Quiet Rain, padded up and gently nudged her kit back toward the sleeping hollows. "You're too young to hunt," she murmured. "And if the sharpclaws don't eat, there'll be no prey for any cat."

"Not fair!" Jagged Peak muttered as his mother guided him away.

Meanwhile the hunters, including Shattered Ice and Turtle Tail, lined up beside the body of the hawk. Each of them took one mouthful, then stepped back for the next cat to take their turn. By the time they had finished, and filed out along the path behind the waterfall, there was very little meat left.

Clear Sky, watching beside Gray Wing, let out an irritated snort. "I still wish we could have eaten it."

Privately Gray Wing agreed with him, but he knew there was no point in complaining. *There just isn't enough food. Every cat is weak, hungry—just clinging on until the sun comes back.*

The pattering of paws sounded behind him; he glanced around to see Bright Stream trotting over to Clear Sky. "Is it true that you caught that huge hawk all by yourself?"

Clear Sky hesitated, basking in the pretty tabby she-cat's admiration. Gray Wing gave a meaningful purr.

"No," Clear Sky admitted. "Gray Wing helped."

Bright Stream gave Gray Wing a nod, but her gaze immediately returned to Clear Sky. Gray Wing took a couple of paces back and left them alone.

"They look good together." A voice spoke at his shoulder; Gray Wing turned to see the elder Silver Frost standing beside him. "There'll be kits come the warmest moon."

Gray Wing nodded. Any cat with half an eye could see how close his brother and Bright Stream were as they stood with their heads together murmuring to each other.

"More than one litter, maybe," Silver Frost went on, giving Gray Wing a nudge. "That Turtle Tail is certainly a beautiful cat."

Hot embarrassment flooded through Gray Wing from ears to tail-tip. He had no idea what to say, and was grateful when he saw Stoneteller approaching them. She took a winding path among her cats, pausing to talk to each one. Though her paws were unsteady because of her great age, Gray Wing could see the depth of experience in her green gaze and the care she felt for every one of her Tribe.

"There's still a bit of the hawk left," Gray Wing heard her murmur to Snow Hare, who was stretched out in one of the sleeping hollows, washing her belly. "You should eat something."

Snow Hare paused in her tongue strokes. "I'm leaving the food for the young ones," she replied. "They need their strength for hunting."

Stoneteller bent her head and touched the elder's ear with her nose. "You have earned your food many times over."

"Perhaps the mountains have fed us for long enough." It was Lion's Roar who had spoken from where he sat a tail-length away.

Stoneteller gave him a swift glance, full of meaning.

What's that all about? Gray Wing asked himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by Quiet Rain, who came to sit beside him. "Have you eaten anything?" she asked.

All we ever talk about is food, Gray Wing thought. *Or the lack of it.* Trying to curb his impatience, he replied, "I'll have

something before I go out again.”

To his relief, his mother didn’t insist. “You did very well to catch that hawk,” she meowed.

“It wasn’t just me,” Gray Wing told her. “Clear Sky made this amazing leap to bring it down. I just helped hold it while he killed it.”

“You *both* did well,” Quiet Rain purred. She turned to look at her young kits, who were scuffling together close by. “I hope that Jagged Peak and Fluttering Bird will be just as skillful when they’re old enough to hunt.”

At that moment, Jagged Peak swiped his sister’s paws out from underneath her. Fluttering Bird let out a wail as she fell over, hitting her head on a rock. Instead of getting up again, she lay still, whimpering.

“You’re such a silly kit!” Jagged Peak exclaimed.

As Quiet Rain padded over to give her daughter a comforting lick, Gray Wing noticed how small and fragile Fluttering Bird looked. Her head seemed too big for her body, and when she scrambled to her paws again her legs wobbled. Jagged Peak, on the other hand, was strong and well muscled, his gray tabby fur thick and healthy.

While Quiet Rain took care of his sister, Jagged Peak scampered over to Gray Wing. “Tell me about the hawk,” he demanded. “How did you catch it? I bet I could catch one if I was allowed out of this stupid cave!”

Gray Wing purred excitedly. “You should have seen Clear Sky’s leap—”

A loud yowl cut off Gray Wing’s story. “Let all cats be silent! Stoneteller will speak!”

The cat who had made the announcement was Shaded Moss, a black-and-white tom who was one of the strongest and most respected cats of the Tribe. He stood on a boulder at the far end of the cavern, with Stoneteller beside him. The old cat looked even more fragile next to his powerful figure.

As he wriggled his way toward the front of the crowd gathered around the boulder, Gray Wing heard murmurs of curiosity from the others.

“Maybe Stoneteller is going to appoint Shaded Moss as her replacement,” Silver Frost suggested.

“It’s time she appointed some cat,” Snow Hare agreed. “It’s

what we've all been expecting for moons."

Gray Wing found himself a place to sit next to Clear Sky and Bright Stream, and looked up at Stoneteller and Shaded Moss. Stoneteller rose to her paws and let her gaze travel over her Tribe until the murmuring died away into silence.

"I am grateful to all of you for working so hard to survive here," she began, her voice so faint that it could scarcely be heard above the sound of the waterfall. "I am proud to be your Healer, but I have to accept that there are things even I cannot put right. Lack of space and lack of food are beyond my control."

"It's not your fault!" Silver Frost called out. "Don't give up!"

Stoneteller dipped her head in acknowledgment of the elder's support. "Our home cannot support us all," she continued. "But there is another place for some of us, full of sunlight and warmth and prey for all seasons. I have seen it . . . in my dreams."

Utter silence greeted her announcement. Gray Wing couldn't make sense of what the Healer had just said. *Dreams? What's the point of that? I dreamed I killed a huge eagle and ate it all myself, but I was still hungry when I woke up!*

He noticed that Lion's Roar sat bolt upright as Stoneteller spoke and was staring at her, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I believe in my heart that these mountains are not where every cat belongs," Stoneteller went on. "The other place is waiting for those of you who are brave enough to make the journey. Shaded Moss will lead you there, with my blessing."

The old white cat glanced once more around her Tribe, her gaze full of sadness and pain. Then she slid down from the top of the boulder and vanished into the tunnel at the back of the cave that led to her own den.

A flood of shocked speculation passed through the rest of the cats. After a couple of heartbeats, Shaded Moss stepped forward and raised his tail for silence.

"This has been my home all my life," he began when he could make himself heard. His voice was solemn. "I always expected to die here. But if Stoneteller believes that some of us must leave to find the place of her dream, then I will go, and do my best to keep you safe."

Dappled Pelt sprang to her paws, and her golden eyes were

shining. "I'll go!"

"So will I!" Tall Shadow added, her sleek black figure tense with excitement as she leaped up to stand beside her friend.

"Are you flea-brained?" Twisted Branch, a scraggy brown tom, stared incredulously at the two she-cats. "Wandering off with no idea where you're heading?"

Gray Wing remained silent, but he couldn't help agreeing with Twisted Branch. The mountains were his home: He knew every rock, every bush, every trickling stream. *It would tear my heart in two if I had to leave just because Stoneteller had a dream.*

Turning to Clear Sky, he was amazed to see excitement gleaming in his brother's eyes. "You're not seriously considering this?" he asked.

"Why not?" Clear Sky demanded in return. "This could be the answer to all our problems. What's the point of struggling to feed every mouth if there's an alternative?" His whiskers quivered eagerly. "It will be an adventure!" He called out to Shaded Moss: "I'll go!" Glancing at Bright Stream, he added, "You'll come too, won't you?"

Bright Stream leaned closer to Clear Sky. "I don't know. . . . Would you really go without me?"

Before Clear Sky could reply, little Jagged Peak wormed his way forward between his two older brothers, followed by Fluttering Bird. "I want to go!" he announced loudly.

Fluttering Bird nodded enthusiastically. "Me too!" she squeaked.

Quiet Rain followed them, and drew both kits closer to her with a sweep of her tail. "Certainly not!" she meowed. "You two are staying right here."

"You could come with us," Jagged Peak suggested.

His mother shook her head. "This is my home," she said. "We've survived before. When the warm season returns, we'll have enough to eat."

Gray Wing dipped his head in agreement. *How can they forget what Quiet Rain told me when I was a kit? This place was promised to us by a cat who led us here from a faraway lake. How can we think of leaving?*

Shaded Moss's powerful voice rose up again over the clamor. "No cat needs to decide yet," he announced. "Give some thought to what you want to do. The half moon is just past; I

will leave at the next full moon along with any—”

He broke off, his gaze fixed on the far end of the cave. Turning his head, Gray Wing saw the hunting party making their way inside. Their pelts were clotted with snow and their heads drooped.

Not one was carrying prey.

“We’re sorry,” Shattered Ice called out. “The snow is heavier than ever, and there wasn’t a single—”

“We’re leaving!” some cat yowled from the crowd around Shaded Moss.

The hunting party stood still for a moment, glancing at each other in confusion and dismay. Then they pelted down the length of the cavern to listen as their Tribemates explained what Stoneteller had told them, and what Shaded Moss intended to do.

Turtle Tail made her way to where Gray Wing was sitting and plopped down beside him, beginning to clean the melting snow from her pelt. “Isn’t this great?” she asked between licks. “A warm place where there’s plenty of prey, just waiting for us? Are you going, Gray Wing?”

“I am,” Clear Sky responded, before Gray Wing could answer. “And so is Bright Stream.” The young she-cat gave him an uncertain look, but Clear Sky didn’t notice. “It’ll be a hard journey, but I think it’ll be worth it.”

“It’ll be *wonderful!*” Turtle Tail blinked happily. “Come on, Gray Wing! How about it?”

Gray Wing couldn’t give her the answer she wanted. As he looked around the cave at the cats he had known all his life, he couldn’t imagine abandoning them for a place that might exist only in Stoneteller’s dream.

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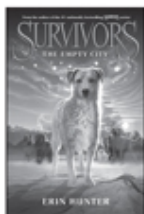
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ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich, mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling *Survivors* and *Seekers* series.

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